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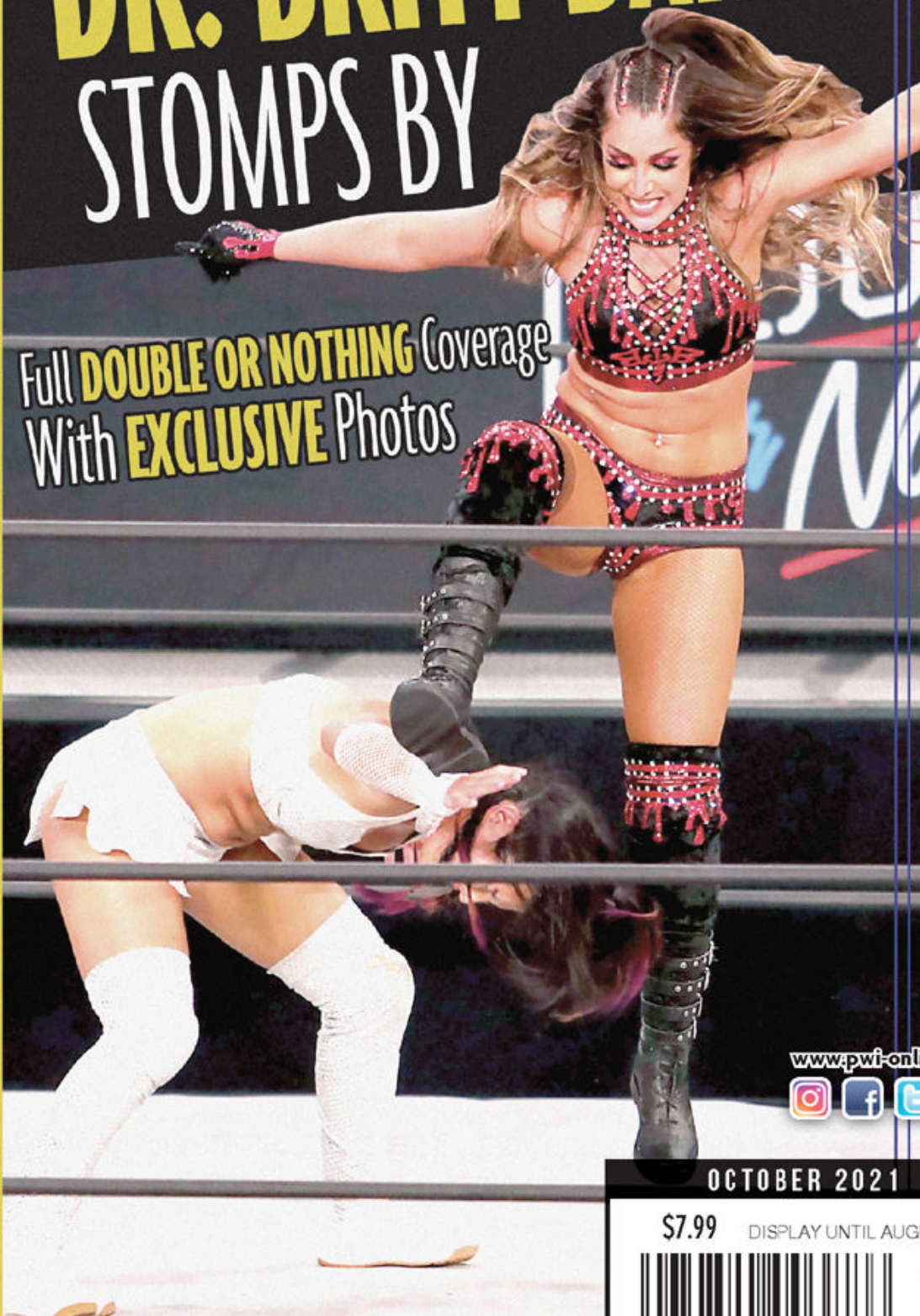


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Each week, Castle and Solomon interview top wrestling personalities or fellow *PWI* writers about the hottest topics in the sport.

Their guest list has included Seth Rollins, Kofi Kingston, Will Ospreay, Becky Lynch, Cody Rhodes, and Ronda Rousey, as well as *PWI*'s own Harry Burkett, Mike Bessler, Louie D, and Kevin McElvaney.

The “*PWI* Podcast” is available as a free subscription at Apple Podcasts or streaming at pwi-online.com

FROM the DESK OF...

I WON'T BORE you with the reasons why, but this issue required a slightly quicker turnaround for us than usual. That's both a blessing and a curse—a curse because we have a shorter editorial lead time, and it's tougher meeting our print deadline. But it's also a good thing, because it means we can react more immediately to what's going on *right now*.

Because of our print schedule, for instance, we were able to provide in-depth coverage of AEW's Double or Nothing event, while Al Castle's "Hotseat" interview with Britt Baker was conducted after her recent world title victory.

Even with the shorter lead time, there are bound to be things that happen after press time. Not to peel back the curtain too much, but Harry Burkett's "Ringside" is typically one of the final pieces written in every issue. It is, after all, a news column.

Typically, Harry will be able to weigh in on the various important topics that are relevant just before press time, from untimely passings to breaking news stories. But, even though he wrote extensively about WWE's May budget cuts, Harry's column was written and edited before the June talent releases.

As I write this, we don't have much information—even rumors—about why these cuts were made, but WWE shocked fans and analysts alike on June 2 by officially parting ways with Braun Strowman, Aleister Black, Lana, Ruby Riott, Buddy Murphy, and Santana Garrett. These releases are all surprising in their own way, as any one of these performers had quite a bit to offer the company.

Perhaps least surprising is the release of Santana Garrett—not because she isn't a talented wrestler, but because she hasn't been used much in recent months (and, for NXT talent, that's usually not a good sign).

In the case of Buddy Murphy, WWE is letting go of the man who revitalized *205 Live* with his remarkable athleticism and in-ring presence. More recently, he played second fiddle to Seth Rollins, and seemed headed for an awkward romance angle with Rey Mysterio's daughter, Aalyah.

As Heidi Lovelace, Ruby Riott was considered one of the best woman wrestlers on the independent circuit. She took part in some memorable moments and matches as leader of The Riott Squad, but, for some reason, never captured any WWE gold. She'll be a great addition to any locker room, whether it's one of a major promotion or on the indies.

Poor Lana! After Rusev became Miro in AEW, she was put through the ringer—or, literally, a table—week after week by Nia Jax. Miro noted in an interview with *PWI* that it was difficult to watch this unfold, seeming to believe it was a kind of hazing or rib against his real-life wife. It seems inevitable that the happy couple will be reunited somehow in AEW.

Aleister Black is a former NXT champion who, just last year, scored a convincing WrestleMania win over current World champ Bobby Lashley. This year, he's hardly been seen at all. Following some strange vignettes aired on recent episodes of *Smackdown*, he's been squandered.

Finally: Braun Strowman. After squashing Goldberg at WrestleMania 36, Strowman charted a lengthy, though not particularly eventful, reign as WWE Universal champion. Given WWE's continued faith in him, it's hard to imagine this is anything but a financial decision.

Here's hoping each of these wrestlers finds success in their future endeavors ... wherever and whatever those might be.

Kevin McElvaney
Editor-in-Chief

PRO Wrestling
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Mysterious Q

Since September 2019, Houston, Texas' own Mysterious Q has reigned as New Texas Pro Wrestling champion. This spotlight photo was taken on April 24, 2021, when the powerful, 6'2" grappler successfully retained the strap against Ring of Honor's Mike Bennett.



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REACHING YOU ...

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COVER PHOTOS: **BRITT BAKER/HIKARU SHIDA** BY JOHN SMOLEK
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BEFORE the BELL

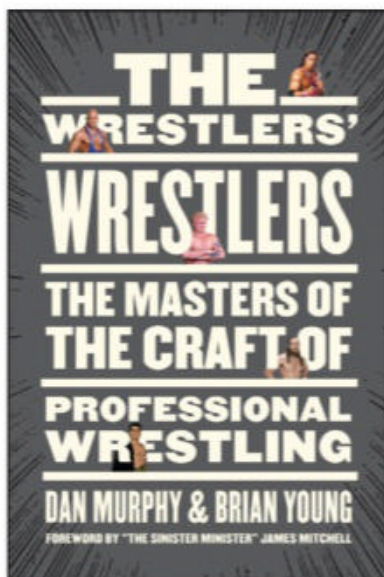
COMPILED BY MIKE BESSLER

MEDIA REVIEWS

THE WRESTLERS' WRESTLERS

Whoever claimed “history is written by the victors” obviously didn’t know much about professional wrestling. Of course, top guys like Bret Hart and Mick Foley enjoy the privilege of some big megaphones when it comes to telling their respective sides of the story. But there are plenty of opportunities for everyone to get in on the action these days, including fans, bloggers, and jobbers. Although platforms now include internet and video forums, the print industry is still alive and kicking. And it remains a preferred format for professional writers and historians, as is the case with the new book *The Wrestlers’ Wrestlers: The Masters of the Craft of Professional Wrestling*, by Dan Murphy and Brian Young.

Murphy, whose work previously and extensively graced the pages of *PWI* for over two decades, still has the knack to develop the kind of reasoned and cogent criteria that he utilized in running down the *PWI* “500” and “Women’s 50/100” rankings during his tenure. But, in *The Wrestlers’ Wrestlers*, formidable weight is especially provided to the respect that grapplers have earned from their peers while building their legacies, which decidedly distinguishes this



work from encyclopedia-styled compilations and almanacs.

It’s the concept of what constitutes a “wrestler’s wrestler” that makes this volume essential reading. Through the work of Murphy and Young, history unfolds in earnest as readers gain new perspectives on big names like Dusty Rhodes, Ric Flair, and AJ Styles, while learning about hitherto unsung heroes, including “Hustler” Rip Rogers, Bob Roop, and Adrian Street. A smattering of the best lady grapplers, tag teams, and international stars brings diversity to the discussion.

The details within these profiles provide the kind of unique context that distinguishes *The Wrestlers’ Wrestlers* from other compendia. From George Gordienko’s alleged ties to the Communist Party to stories involving the likes of “Pistol” Pez Whatley and “Brutal” Bob Evans, the authors develop a narrative that is both complex and absorbing. There’s even an entire section devoted to the thankless ranks of “enhancement talent.”

With an engaging style and a wealth of content, *The Wrestlers’ Wrestlers* is well deserving of five out of five suplexes.



MATT TREMONT: LIFE AFTER DEATH

The hardcore icon assumes unfettered control of his legacy in this long-form documentary by filmmaker Kenny Johnson. This deep dive into Tremont’s body of work provides an unflinching look at the blood-soaked milestones of his career, from his celebrated era as a CZW standout to his retirement bout in late-2020. It’s a passion play of sorts, blending healthy quantities of ultra-violence and self-sacrifice with plenty of heartfelt emotion. Deathmatch enthusiasts will delight in the smorgasbord of gore in the film, but wrestling fans with more delicate constitutions might be better served by sticking with the stuff that’s standard fare for basic cable. **88 out of 100 thumbtacks.**



AEW UNRESTRICTED PODCAST



A veritable picture window into the hearts and minds of AEW performers, *Unrestricted* provides a steady supply of fresh perspective via this weekly show. AEW referee Aubrey Edwards, who co-hosts the podcast with Tony Schiavone, is a natural on the mic, chatting up her coworkers with candor and charisma. The interview team clicks well with their broad spectrum of guests, which thus far has included the likes of Tay Conti, Christian Cage, and Jerry Lynn. Some occasional coarse language keeps the product edgy and consistent with AEW’s public image, but those listening at work might want to turn off the Bluetooth speaker and don some earbuds when cueing up a new episode. **Three out of four ringposts.**

TALKIN' TRASH

Here's a list of the top 10 wrestling-related items you've been talking about lately and our gut reaction to each:

10. CM Punk trolls John Cena on Twitter regarding a geopolitical controversy.

The best clapback by Cena would have been to change his Twitter bio to read: "UNDEFEATED IN MMA."

9. Eva Marie stages a comeback.

A popular almanac saw it coming, as this year's long-term forecast called for "familiar, yet regrettable conditions."

8. AEW announces it will move to TBS in 2022.

In honor of the network's penchant for reruns, a new group will debut: The Butcher, The Blade, and Urkel.

7. Vice TV premieres season three of *Dark Side of the Ring*.

Not wanting to miss out on a trend, Peacock orders a gritty *Camp WWE* reboot where all the campers are serial killers.

6. Daniel Bryan's deal with WWE expires.

Perhaps The "Eco-Warrior" shouldn't have insisted on a contract with biodegradable terms and conditions.

5. Jim Ross cites Randy Orton as the best wrestler in the world.

Ross also declared plain oatmeal as the best breakfast food and medium-pile carpet as the best floor covering.

4. Impact Wrestling inks a deal with Samsung TV for a dedicated channel and VOD programming.

Samsung edged out the closest bidders, Iceland Public Access Television and the IKEA In-Store TV Network.

3. WWE consolidates its television and film divisions into a single entity, WWE Media.

It's also forced live-event concessioners to consolidate all condiments into a single product—"WWE Ketchsturd."

2. A herd of zombies seemingly consumes The Miz after his defeat at *WWE Backlash*.

Turns out that booking a bunch of ghouls to eat a wrestler makes for a finish that's rather hard to swallow.

1. Rey and Dominik Mysterio become WWE's first-ever father-and-son tag team champs.

Much better than Vince's first choice for tag champs: a pair of Roman Reigns' sweatsocks and an 8x10 glossy of Shane O'Mac.



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CENTER RING

... WITH GEORGE NAPOLITANO

WITH PWI SINCE: 2003

FIRST PWI ASSIGNMENT: WrestleMania 2003

WHAT I DO: Photographer

FAVORITE WRESTLING MATCH EVER: Since I have been photographing wrestling for 50 years, it's hard to say what has been my favorite wrestling match. If it's the '70s, it has to be Superstar Graham vs. Mil Mascaras or Superstar vs. Dusty Rhodes. In the '80s, any match between Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat. In the '90s, the interactions between "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, The Rock, and Vince McMahon were always photogenic.

HOBBIES AND INTERESTS OUTSIDE OF WRESTLING: Photographing baseball—mainly the Mets—and setting up my Lionel trains.

THE BEST MOVIE I'VE EVER SEEN: The *Godfather* series

WHAT I REALLY WANT READERS TO KNOW ABOUT ME: I have thoroughly enjoyed having the opportunity to travel the world and see so many great matches and events in my 50 years of covering wrestling.

While my series of magazines for Starlog Press (*Wrestling All Stars*, *Ringside*, *TV Wrestlers*, and others) were competition to *PWI*, I want to thank former editor Stu Saks for asking me to become a contributor after my magazines ceased operation. I have truly enjoyed the work that Stu Saks, his staff, and now Kevin McElvaney have put into making *PWI* the number-one wrestling magazine in the world.



George Napolitano poses with Mil Mascaras at the 2011 Cauliflower Alley Club Reunion.

ONE TO WATCH: BILLY DIXON

Every wrestler fights for something, but Billy Dixon fights for everyone. Now six years into the business, the 25-year-old grappler has fused his vision for social justice and inclusion with a powerful in-ring persona—winning new fans and admirers at every turn.

Growing up, Billy spent most of his time with his grandparents, as his mother was sick with a protracted illness. His grandmother and grandfather were huge wrestling fans, mixing the contemporary shows like *Raw* and *Nitro* with classic old tapes featuring workers like Dusty Rhodes, Junkyard Dog, and “Ice-man” King Parsons. This was a formative experience for Billy, who received a nudge of encouragement from his grandpa.

“I remember watching wrestling with him one day, and he said, ‘I think you’re going to do this someday,’” Dixon recalled.

After high school, Dixon spent some time in college, but it was an unfulfilling time. He ultimately found inspiration in wrestling and pursued training opportunities, receiving vital instruction and encouragement from his friend Jared Evans. Nevertheless, he had some concerns about how he’d fare with peers and fans.

“I always wanted to be a wrestler, but I didn’t think the business would allow queer people to flourish,” he said.

But the wrestling world has indeed embraced him, and Billy Dixon has used the opportunity to promote a message of positivity and hope. “I don’t believe in being quiet when a lot of people had to be loud,” he said. “My job is to continue to make a space where people can *choose* to be either quiet or loud.”

Sadly, Billy’s grandparents passed away before they could see him compete. But his mother has seen him wrestle, even though she can’t bear the idea of him getting hurt. “I told her, ‘Please don’t watch it.’ I begged,” he said. “She hates it.”

Billy Dixon dons signature white overalls (sometimes with a pink triangle) for his in-ring exploits. Drawing heavily from the old-school style, he describes his approach as scrappy and rabid, in the tradition of his ‘rasslin’ favorites. Dixon employs

a diving Thesz Press nicknamed “The Bodega Press” to lay competitors down for the three-count, and he earns tap out wins with a submission hold called the “EMT,” named for Elijah McClain, Tony McDade, and Breonna Taylor. A budding tactician, Billy has competed regularly in Washington D.C., New York, and New Jersey, and he is the reigning Chocolate City champion for F1ght Club Pro Wrestling.

In addition to hands-on competition, Billy Dixon also works as a promoter and producer, running his own events and opening a production house. His “Paris Is Bumping” show in late-2020 introduced wrestling fans to the ballroom scene that served as a haven and melting pot for LGBTQ+ culture in New York back in the 1970s and ’80s.

Talented, versatile, and savvy, Billy Dixon is determined that pro wrestling is his future. And he’s confident that he can do it all, whether he’s in the ring or behind the scenes.

“I would like for this to pay all of my bills,” he explained. “Being a starving artist is so overrated! I would like to share my talents on a bigger stage, and I am willing to work my way up to do it.”



PHOTO BY JAYLEE PHOTOGRAPHY

FIGHTING FARE: *ZIGGY HAIM*

It's a safe bet that plenty of Ziggy Haim's opponents have found themselves wondering what exactly fuels her nonstop exuberance and resilience. Indeed, a love of music plays an integral role in getting Ziggy amped up on the way to a show and before she hits the ropes. Here are a few of her heartfelt faves ...

▶ **Trixie Mattel – “Heavy Crown”**

I adore Trixie; she means a lot to me, and so does this song. Lyrically, it really resonates with me. Not exactly a great “hype-up” song or something I listen to if I want to get amped to wrestle. But definitely something I put on repeat on long road trips by myself.

▶ **Frank Turner – “Four Simple Words”**

This is probably my longest-lived pump-up jam. I used to listen to this song to get excited before going to concerts as a teen, and I still love it to this day. It gives me a feeling of belonging and community, which is very pop punk, but also very fun for getting excited to wrestle.

▶ **Kanye West – “Good Morning”**

*The whole of **Graduation** means so much to me, and it's something I listen to as a whole on almost every road trip. I think the album is a masterpiece, but this song is probably my favorite.*

▶ **Simple Plan – “Don't Wanna Think About You”**

*This song is a deep cut and (weirdly) probably one of my favorite songs ever. It was exclusively on the **Scooby-Doo 2** soundtrack and for some reason hits me in deep*



COURTESY OF ZIGGY HAIM/GO PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

emotions like nothing else. Fantastic for head-banging, but also singing loudly in the car. What can I say? My music taste was formed via Hot Topic.

▶ **Lorde – “SuperCut”**

*If I was told I could only listen to one album every day for the rest of forever, it would be **Melodrama** by Lorde, no questions asked. I'm a sucker for emotional, sad kid pop and songs I can scream at the top of my lungs, and it's the perfect mix. “SuperCut” is the type of song that can bring out lots of different feelings, depending on the mood you're in when you listen.*

NOSTALGIA REWIND

FIRE PRO WRESTLING RETURNS

The chunkier iteration of the PlayStation 2 doesn't exactly fetch a king's ransom on eBay these days. But, back in the heady days of 2007, the PS2 was the sharpest of cutting-edge technology. In fact, the PS2 was such a big deal that it was the sole platform for one of the most highly anticipated wrestling games of the era, *Fire Pro Wrestling Returns*.

Prior to its first proper North American release, the *Fire Pro Wrestling* series had attained almost legendary status through its earlier releases for PC, arcade, and other platforms. And while the American marketplace was already saturated with wrestling titles from the big promotions, the promise of an extensive roster and the kind of weird and crazy matches previously unseen in video games piqued the collective curiosity of the wrestle-gaming community.

Of course, *Fire Pro Wrestling Returns* couldn't match the “gee-whiz” panache of *WWE SmackDown vs. Raw 2007*—or even some of the comparable offerings for PS1. But the game brought together a healthy dose of retro charm with one of the most immersive creative interfaces ever seen up to that time. The “create-a-wrestler” feature allowed players to create and store up to 500 custom-designed wrestlers alongside a pre-programmed roster of 327 characters, based on some of the most popular grapplers in the world. The most en-

thusiastic players could even design their own titles, create stables, and book tournaments featuring dopelgangers like “Terry Hero” and ring legends like Giant Baba.

It was an exciting time, for sure. But time whizzes through the crossroads of entertainment and technology, and groundbreaking games like *TNA: iMPACT!* and the rapid development of online gaming retired *Fire Pro Wrestling Returns* to dusty shelves and secondhand shops. But to this day, the game consistently ranks prominently in compilations of the best wrestling games of all time. And the series returned with the 2017 release of the NJPW-branded *Fire Pro Wrestling World*.



PHOTO BY MIKE BESSLER

RINGSIDE

WITH HARRY BURKETT

EVERYTHING THAT SHOULD have happened at AEW's Double or Nothing pay-per-view ... actually did happen. **The Inner Circle** scored a big five-on-five win over **The Pinnacle** in their Stadium Stampede match. **Kenny Omega** retained the AEW World championship in a thrilling three-way over **Orange Cassidy** and **PAC**. **Dr. Britt Baker** parlayed her gutsy loss to **Thunder Rosa** into a Women's title victory over **Hikaru Shida**. **Cody Rhodes** shut **Anthony Ogogo's** big mouth.

Most important, there was a capacity crowd of approximately 5,500 real-life wrestling spectators at Daily's Place in Jacksonville, Florida. To quote AEW announcer **Jim Ross**, just after **Jungle Boy** eliminated **Christian Cage** to win the Casino Battle Royale, "It's the greatest thing in the world to be a wrestling fan!"

AEW is taking *Dynamite* on the road in mid-summer, with its weekly program emanating from the historic James L. Knight Center in Miami on July 7; the H-E-B Center in Cedar Park, Texas, on July 14; and the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas, on July 21.

"We've missed touring cities, meeting the fans, and hearing their roar during our live shows," said AEW President **Tony Khan**. "Please be assured, we are working closely with the venues to comply with state and local regulations in each city."

And, for all the talk about ending live tours, WWE announced an

ambitious 21-city tour for this summer, consisting of "Supershow" events on Saturdays and Sundays, kicking off at the PPG Paints Arena in Pittsburgh on July 24, and then picking up dates for *Raw* and *Smackdown* beginning August 2. SummerSlam takes place on a Saturday this year, on August 21.

It's a leaner, meaner WWE taking shape in the post-pandemic wrestling industry. Even more layoffs were announced in May, in addition to the large round of

talent cuts the previous month. With the notable exceptions of **Velveteen Dream** and former NXT referee **Drake Wuerz**, the second round of cuts included mostly management executives and digital and production personnel. These cuts were more shocking in some ways because of the many years these employees had dedicated to WWE.

Content Director **James Wortman**, who had been a WWE employee for over a decade, expressed his astonishment on Twitter: "This isn't something I expected to say today or any day, but I am no longer with WWE after 11 years. Thank you to all the friends I've made during that time and to the talented people I've had the pleasure to work with."

Adam Kirshner, who most recently served as Media & Metadata Operations Manager, started out as WWE's first digital



Riho attempts a flying crossbody on Serena Deeb during the Double or Nothing Buy-In show. This match kicked off the first PPV event to be held in front of a capacity crowd since the pandemic began.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



Antonio Inoki speaks after his 2010 induction into the WWE Hall of Fame, with Eve Torres and Kelly Kelly by his side. Rumors of a new partnership between WWE and New Japan spark memories of the two companies' past collaborations, including a brief, "unofficial" WWF title run for Inoki in 1979.

intern, was heavily involved in the WWE Network's redesign a few years ago, and contributed greatly to WWE's YouTube Channel. He's someone who seemed to grow with the company, but, alas, he's now "looking forward to giving this same 110 percent, and then some, wherever I land."

AEW could use some help with its website, seriously.

WWE President **Nick Khan** and Executive Vice President of TV Production **Kevin Dunn** are consolidating departments under their direct supervision and are breaking down walls that previously existed between television and digital, leading to some of the layoffs. **James Rosenstock**, Executive Vice President of International, was perhaps the most powerful figure to be laid off, as Khan added Rosenstock's duties to his portfolio. Another EVP to be future-endavored was eight-year employee **Jayar Donlan**, head of WWE's Advanced Media Group.

WWE's scaled-back approach during the pandemic revealed areas where Khan, Dunn, and **Vince McMahon** believed they could do just as much with less.

Hopefully, a less-bureaucratic WWE will result in a more imaginative culture, and there's a scintillating rumor going around that indicates this may be the case. Remember the buzz created when AEW star Chris Jericho broke down the "Forbidden Door" to appear on *The Steve Austin Show* on the WWE Network? How about a working relationship with New Japan Pro-Wrestling?

According to *The Wrestling Observer*, Nick Khan has been negotiating with NJPW to send WWE stars to Japan and NJPW stars to North America. WWE has been tentative about pursuing the lucrative Japanese market full-throttle, largely because of the strength of New Japan.

While the NWA and AWA often dealt with All Japan Pro Wrestling in the 1970s and '80s, the WWF often worked with New Japan. **Andre The Giant's** multiple tours, **Antonio Inoki's** one-week WWF title reign, the appearances of WWF junior heavyweight champion **Tiger Mask**, and **Hisashi Shinma's** six-year tenure as on-screen WWF president were all results of their previous partnership.

Will we see **Kazuchika Okada** vs. **Roman Reigns** at the Tokyo Dome? Or **The Guerrillas of Destiny** vs. **The Usos**? We can only dream!

Speaking of Asia, **John Cena** nearly created an international incident when he said, "Taiwan is the first country to watch *Fast & Furious 9*," during an interview with Taiwanese broadcaster TVBS to promote his new movie. Taiwan's political status has been controversial since the Chinese Communist Revolution ended in 1949. Mainland China still insists that Taiwan is a runaway province, and most countries—including the U.S.—do not recognize its independence.

Cena delivered what many considered to be an over-the-top apology on the Chinese social media platform Weibo. "I must say right now, it's very, very, very, very, very, very important," said a sleepy-eyed Cena in Mandarin. "I love and respect China and Chinese people. I'm very, very sorry for my mistake."

Universal produced *Fast & Furious 9*, and the Chinese market is critical to its success. One innocent word-slip placed Cena in a no-win situation. Some complained that Cena had jeopardized a multimillion-dollar venture with his geopolitical faux pas, and others criticized him for toeing the Chinese Communist line.

Cena has proven to be a great ambassador for WWE through his support of the troops and his work with the Make-A-Wish Foundation. He's a good guy who went over his head with this one.

For the record, Wikipedia refers to Taiwan as a country.

Taya Valkyrie made her NXT debut as **Franky Monet**, defeating **Cora Jade**. Monet's pretentious, pooch-toting character is



ECW original New Jack passed away suddenly on May 14, 2021. He leaves behind an unforgettable, if controversial, legacy that is explored in great detail in this month's "Righteous Wrap-Up" (page 62).

a throwback to the 1990s, but, if anyone can pull it off, it's the talented "Wera Loca."

At the announce desk, **Beth Phoenix** remarked that Monet's finisher—a version of the Glam Slam—looked very familiar.

Congratulations to **Miro** on his ascendance to dominance! He's looked unstoppable since defeating **Darby Allin** for the TNT championship and forcing **Lance Archer** to pass out at Double or Nothing. Likewise, **The Young Bucks** have kicked it to a higher level since capturing the AEW World tag team title, defeating **Jon Moxley** and **Eddie Kingston** at Double or Nothing—using four consecutive BTE triggers to pin Moxley, no less.

I'd also like to congratulate **World Famous CB**, formerly known as **Cheeseburger**, for defeating **Wheeler YUTA** in a Pure rules match on ROH television and reaching number six in our Ring of Honor top 10. **LSG** and **Joe Keys** were the final two participants in a battle royal intended to put a lucky, unranked ROH wrestler in the title chase, and they debuted at numbers seven

and eight, respectively. They will wrestle in a one-on-one bout in the near future.

Too many established ROH stars are satisfied with being trainers and elder statesmen. Time to step up, because new blood is taking over!

This 'n' that: With Kenny Omega boosting *IMPACT Wrestling's* ratings as the company's new world champion, people are starting to wonder what AEW is getting out of this ... Does **Moose** think he can get along with **Sami Callihan**? Ask **Ken Shamrock** ... AEW's All Out will take place on September 5 in Chicago, and Full Gear will be held on November 6 in St. Louis ... AEW has reportedly signed **Bear Country** and **Mark Sterling** ... AEW fired Spanish-language announcer **Willie Urbina** for mocking **Hikaru Shida's** accent during a commercial break for *Dynamite* ... **Daniel Bryan** could appear anywhere, considering his WWE contract expired days after his loss to Universal champion **Roman Reigns** in a career-vs.-championship match on the April 30 broadcast of *Smackdown*.

New Jack leads the list of notable passings for this issue. The

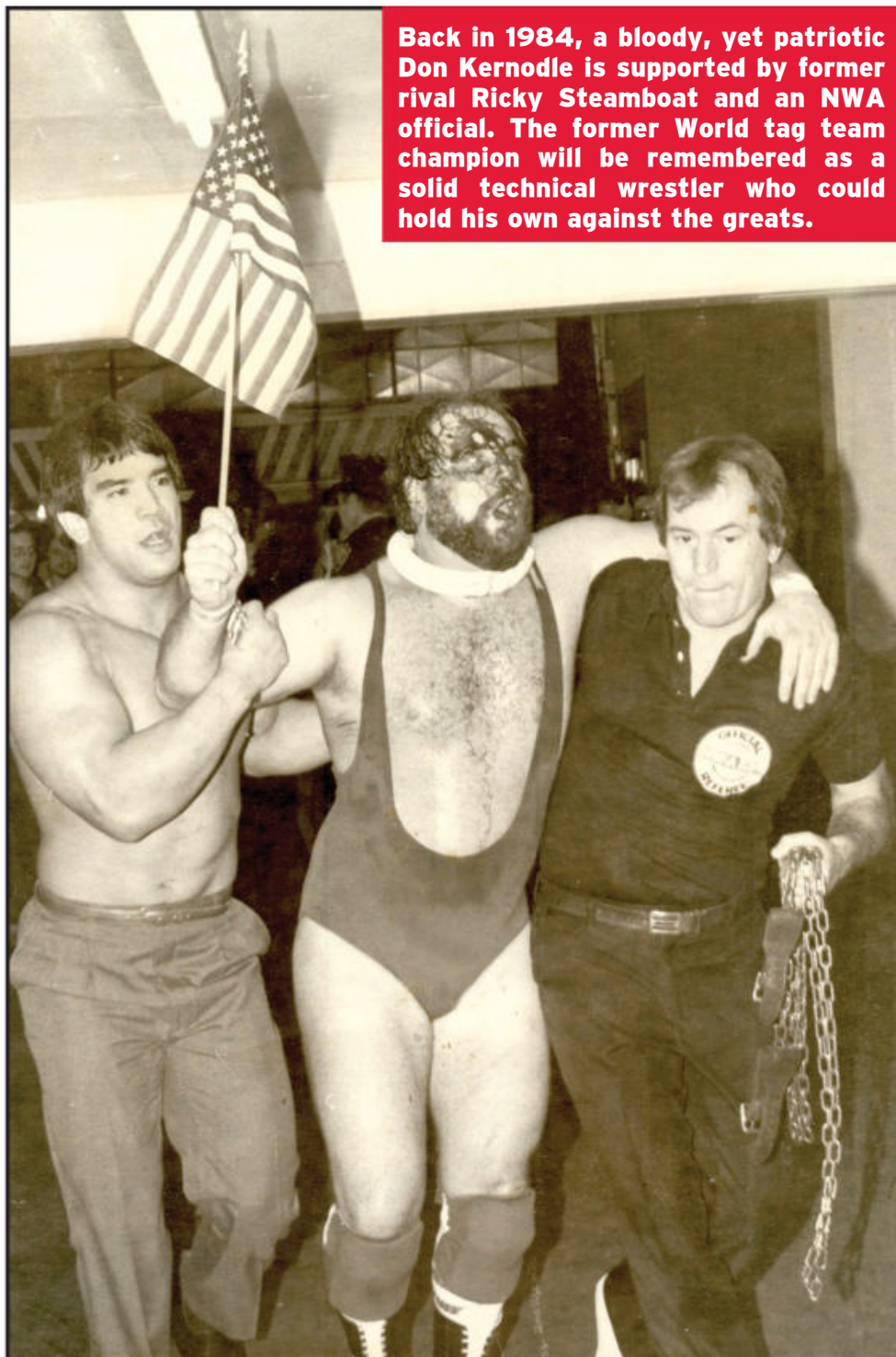
58-year-old hardcore pioneer died on May 14 in his hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina. New Jack gained fame in an unlikely promotion, **Jim Cornette's** Smoky Mountain Wrestling, where he and **Mustafa Saed** formed **The Gangstas** and waged a bloody war against **The Rock 'n' Roll Express**. The Gangstas were a better fit for ECW, where they feuded with **Public Enemy**, **The Headhunters**, **The Eliminators**, and **The Dudley Boyz**.

Unfortunately, New Jack was just as well known for his unadvised stunts, including his use of a staple gun as a weapon, his abuse of **Erich Kulas**

in a notorious 1996 bout, and diving off balconies. He broke his leg, incurred brain damage and a skull fracture, and was permanently blinded in his right eye after he and opponent **Vic Grimes** fell off a scaffold at the appropriately named Living Dangerously 2000.

Don Kernodle didn't have the longevity or the stage to be remembered as one of the all-time greats, but proved that he could hang with the all-time greats in any kind of match. Kernodle died on May 17 in Burlington, North Carolina. He was 71 years old.

Although Kernodle's amateur exploits weren't often touted on *Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling*, he quickly won the respect of **Ole and Gene Anderson**, and earned a match against another amateur star, **Bob Roop**, on television in 1973. He didn't gain true notoriety until nearly a decade later, when **Sgt. Slaughter** recruited "Pvt. Kernodle" for his Cobra Corps. Slaughter and Kernodle became dominant NWA World tag team champions, a reign that ended in a steel-cage bloodbath against



Back in 1984, a bloody, yet patriotic Don Kernodle is supported by former rival Ricky Steamboat and an NWA official. The former World tag team champion will be remembered as a solid technical wrestler who could hold his own against the greats.

archrivals **Rick Steamboat** and **Jay Youngblood** at the Greensboro Coliseum.

Kernodle followed Slaughter to the WWF, but soon returned to the NWA, where he won the World tag title two more times with **Bob Orton Jr.** and **Ivan Koloff**. He was a patriotic fan favorite in a hot feud with Koloff, again keeping pace with top talent. In 1986, he curtailed his wrestling career to become an immigration customs official and, later, a deputy sheriff.

Other passings include Pakistan-born **Deepak Massand**, who managed **The Sheik** and **Abdullah the Butcher** during their invasions of Montreal (age 78);

Dick Caricofe, longtime promoter of Maryland's National Wrestling League and father of the late **Neil Superior** (age 79); matinee idol **Paul Christy**, who was named Rookie of the Year in Fred Kohler's Chicago promotion in 1960 before moving on to various Southern territories and later—with wife **Bunny Love** at his side—defeating **Randy Savage** for the ICW title (age 82); and Pittsburgh favorite **Tony Marino**, who held the WWWF International tag team title with **Bruno Sammartino** and **Victor Rivera** and also appeared as the masked **Battman** (age 90).

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

THE CORPORATE BEAST

I support WWE President Nick Khan and Executive Vice President Kevin Dunn in their restructuring of the WWE hierarchy, but it's nonetheless heartbreaking to hear of employees losing their jobs after many years of loyal service. Considering AEW has hired much of the talent laid off by WWE, and that Ring of Honor continued paying its performers during the pandemic shutdown, there's no denying that WWE is looking ruthless by comparison. Where's Tom Phillips?!

CENA-NUFF

Like Dwayne Johnson, John Cena was a media darling who represented WWE splendidly. What happened? Memo to Cena and other Hollywood types in trouble: Don't record video messages in haste, when you're looking tired and afraid, like you're in a POW tape. Consult real damage-control experts to save you from making repeated apologies. It's a shame that it may take considerable time for Cena to recover from this public-relations debacle.

KERNODLE WINS CASH

I recall working past midnight (past deadline yet again!) sometime in the early-2000s, and seeing a repeat of *America's Funniest Home Videos* at about two in the morning. Bob Saget was awarding \$10,000 to Don Kernodle and brother Rocky Kernodle for a video of a snarling miniature pinscher. And to think Jay Youngblood accepted Sgt. Slaughter's Cobra Clutch challenge for a chance to win only \$500! Kernodle was an intelligent guy.

THE THREE PAULS

"Back in 1970, there were the three Pauls: Paul Diamond, Paul DeMarco, and Paul Christy. They were wrestling's heartthrobs; at least they were mine." Pioneering journalist Liz Hunter, who wrote that passage for the October 1984 issue of *PWI*, also confessed to passing up a wrestling card at Madison Square Garden to watch quarterback Joe Namath on *Monday Night Football*. She admired handsome athletes, and counted Christy as one.

QUICK COUNT

BY AL CASTLE

WITH NEW YORK announcing plans to reopen its Broadway theaters right around the same time that WWE announced its plans to return to live touring, it's going to be a race to see which will be first to put on a live show in the Big Apple.

We're going Broadway for this musical-inspired edition of "Quick Count." Break a leg!

SPRING AWAKENING

The spring equinox ushered in more than just April showers and May flowers this year. It ushered in the return of live pro wrestling in the U.S.

After performing in front of largely empty arenas for more than a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, both WWE and AEW announced a return to live touring starting in the spring. AEW welcomed back capacity crowds with its signature annual show, Double or Nothing, which took place in front of 5,000 fans in Jacksonville.

After welcoming more than 40,000 fans to WrestleMania in April, WWE announced in May that it would soon hit the road for a 25-city tour. Rumors also circulated of WWE eyeing an outdoor NFL stadium for this year's SummerSlam.

Although the United States is still not out of the woods when it comes to the coronavirus, vaccination and infection rates keep

moving in the right direction, and—with proper precautions—the time feels right to resume live wrestling.

I'll see you at the matches.

IN THE HEIGHTS

The term "high-flyer" doesn't seem to go far enough when describing Montez Ford.

While loads of modern day wrestlers have made their bones with their aerial ability, none can boast of reaching the altitude of the immensely athletic member of the Street Profits.

In a 2018 WWE training video available on YouTube, Ford's vertical leap was measured at an astonishing 62 inches—more than three times that of the average adult male.

Since then, Ford's "ups" have gotten even more impressive, as



Montez Ford soars through the air, about to deliver his signature frog splash, during a mixed tag bout on Smackdown.

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The Jersey Triad celebrate a World tag team championship victory at 1999's Great American Bash. Al Castle feels the short-lived stable doesn't get enough love from fans and analysts.



PHOTO BY BILL APTER

evidenced by his top rope frog splash finisher. If he got much higher, the WWE production crew might have to move its ring lights. The sky is truly the limit for this WWE superstar.

WICKED

Just halfway through 2021, it's already a horse race to see who will win *PWI* Most Hated Wrestler of the Year, as Roman Reigns and MJF both appear absolutely hell-bent on taking evil to a whole new level.

The entitled WWE Universal champion continues to belittle everyone who shares a ring with him, including his own family. After already reducing his cousin Jey Uso to little more than a servant, he's attempted to do the same with Jey's twin brother Jimmy. So far, Jimmy has resisted—only leading Reigns to grow more disrespectful and dismissive.

Over at AEW, the long-despised MJF somehow outdid himself in the War Games-inspired "Blood & Guts" match. He convinced Sammy Guevara to "quit" by threatening to throw his Inner Circle leader, Chris Jericho, off the top of the cage.

After Guevara obliged, MJF tossed Jericho anyway, injuring the "Demo God's" arm.

AEW and WWE may not be going head-to-head on Wednesday nights anymore, but one competition between the two companies remains as heated as ever: that for the title of wrestling's biggest jerk.

JERSEY BOYS

The 20th anniversary of the closing of WCW has fans nostalgic about some of the great factions to pass through the company, from the New World Order to the Four Horsemen to the Dangerous Alliance.

But, sadly, one group has largely been lost to history, despite kicking some serious butt during WCW's dying days: The Jersey Triad.

Although many fans would prefer to forget what WCW had to offer in 1999, one bright spot was the alliance formed by Diamond Dallas Page, Bam Bam Bigelow, and Chris Kanyon. The three Northeast natives combined their considerable talents to form a trio that brought equal parts athleticism, toughness, and

blind ambition. Together, the team's members went on to win three tag team championships—two in WCW and one in WWE.

One person who surely will never forget the Triad is its lone surviving member, Page, who looked back on that chapter of his career on Chris Jericho's podcast earlier this year. "My vision was 2000/Millennial Freebirds. Everybody goes to a guy who can talk, a big man, and a guy who is going to bump all over the place," Page said. "We had that, but all of us could work. Together, we had a lot of fun."

AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'

One surefire way to get "Stone Cold" Steve Austin to do something was to tell him not to. But, sadly, the rebel spirit that made "The Rattlesnake" one of the biggest stars in wrestling history has largely disappeared from the sport in recent years.

Trevor Murdoch is trying to bring it back. More than a dozen years after his WWE run, the burly Texan is enjoying a career resurgence as the NWA's resident renegade redneck.

On an April episode of *Powerrrr*, NWA champ Nick Aldis teased Murdoch with the prospect of a future title shot, but only if he stayed away from the ring during Aldis' scheduled match later that night. Sure enough, just seconds into the bout, there was Murdoch, brawling at ringside with the other members of Aldis' Strictly Business faction.

Murdoch continued to do as he pleased, consequences be damned, in the weeks that followed. What did it get him? A shot at Aldis' title in the main event of NWA's *When Our Shadows Fall* pay-per-view in June.

Would that other rebellious Texan have carried himself the same way? Oh, hell yeah. □

THE LOCKUP

BY BRIAN R. SOLOMON

IT ISN'T ALWAYS easy being an "old school" wrestling fan. For me, one especially difficult moment took place at WWE's WrestleMania Backlash, where we witnessed a horde of the undead surrounding the ring for Damian Priest's lumberjack match with The Miz. The commendable Adnan Virk, Corey Graves, and Byron Saxton did their best to sell viewers on the real threat of the unfortunate up-and-coming wrestlers compelled to put on costumes and makeup while growling for the cameras. Meanwhile, Priest and Miz joined forces outside the ring to tangle with the ghouls like a scene out of *The Walking Dead*. And it culminated with Miz and John Morrison appearing to be "devoured" by the legion of supposed walking corpses. After that, the show went on as usual, as if nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Now, I love professional wrestling. And I also happen to love zombie movies. But not everything is peanut butter and chocolate, and sometimes mixing together two things you love doesn't really work. I understand that it was a publicity stunt for Dave Bautista's film *Army of the Dead*, which was the official sponsor of WrestleMania Backlash. But, really, there were many creative options available for sponsorship that didn't involve insulting fans' intelligence and shattering any semblance of suspension of disbelief.

Stunts like this one are certainly nothing new in pro wrestling. After all, what longtime fan could forget the infamy of RoboCop showing up to assist Sting at WCW's Capital Combat 1990? Or when Chucky cut a promo on Rick Steiner on *Monday Nitro*? Hell, this isn't even the first time that zombies have appeared,

as anyone who witnessed the first episode of WWE's *ECW on Sci-Fi* back in 2006 can attest. That aspect of wrestling hasn't changed. But what *has* changed dramatically is the mindset of the fan base, and their attitudes toward this sort of thing.

Back in the day, we had a word to describe stuff like wrestling plumbers, Katie Vick, and Rocco the puppet: *WrestleCrap*. Taken from the name of a highly popular website created by R.D. Reynolds and Merle Vincent, which chronicles pro wrestling's most notorious creative missteps, the term came to apply to anything that was the object of general ridicule among the wrestling fan base. And, make no mistake, the ridicule was pretty much across the board. At least, it seemed to be for fans over the age of

While Brian Solomon is a fan of both wrestling and horror movies, he wasn't impressed with the hokey "Zombie Lumberjack" match at WrestleMania Backlash. But, for what it's worth, we think the crumbling lei is sort of a nice touch.



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Poorly conceived and executed angles are nothing new in the world of pro wrestling—just ask Kevin Nash, seen here as “Oz” in WCW. Solomon notes that younger fans, who grew up in the age of “WrestleCrap,” tend to have a more favorable opinion of such shenanigans.

ten—inasmuch as such a thing could be measured in the era before everyone had a voice on social media. Fans *en masse* rolled their collective eyes at The Ultimate Warrior dripping with black slime, groaned at the dance moves of The Gobbledy Gooker, and facepalmed at Vader’s White Castle of Fear. It was generally accepted that this stuff was bad.

But, these days, even a cursory glance across social media will reveal that such consensus can no longer be found. Rather, there is a sizeable and seemingly growing portion of the fan base that can’t get enough of things like the Firefly Fun House, invisible wrestlers, and *Le Dinner Debonair*. Last year, Orange Cassidy—a performer who years ago would’ve been easy grist for the WrestleCrap mill—actually won *PWI*’s Most Popular Wrestler Award. And even I love him!

So, what has changed? Now, I’m just a simple country lawyer, but here’s my theory. Back

in the ’80s and ’90s, when the WrestleCrap tropes really seemed to come into their own, and cartoony, over-the-top gimmicks and storylines were becoming more common, much of the fan base—I would even say the majority of it—was still made up of those who had grown up on wrestling from the more hard-nosed and serious-minded pre-*Hulkamania* era, when “men were men” and wrestlers were ’rasslers, and you almost never saw the curtain of kayfabe pulled back—not even to make a joke.

Of course, there were hokey gimmicks and laughable match stipulations even back then, but, for some reason, they seemed much fewer and farther between. And it was all dressed up in the big picture, which was to sell pro wrestling to the public like a true, genuine sport ... which just happened to be populated by a few colorful characters. When that era’s fans encountered Kevin Nash dressed up like a wizard or the cheeseball humor of Doink

and his assorted squad of little clowns, they cried foul. They had been brought up to take wrestling more seriously, and considered anything that hurt that aspect of the business to be outright garbage.

But what we have now is an entire generation (or more) of fans who have literally grown up with that so-called “garbage.” Folks who first started watching wrestling in the ’90s or even later, who don’t have any of those kayfabe hang-ups, and never were trained to believe pro wrestling couldn’t and shouldn’t be ridiculous, outrageous, and impossible to take seriously. They

were raised on the cartoonish aspects of the WWF and WCW, so now that sort of thing is totally acceptable to them. They never had any pretense of “suspending disbelief.” And so, one person’s WrestleCrap is now another’s wrestling gold.

Where I stand on all this is simple, and I’ve outlined it before on *The PWI Podcast*. I long ago learned to make the distinction between my personal tastes and what is best for business. Sometimes, those two things coincide. Sometimes, they don’t. But, in all cases, what’s best for business must and should win out. Pro wrestling is whatever fans want it to be and will pay for. So, if zombie lumberjacks put butts in proverbial seats—or eyeballs in front of screens—then I say have at it. However, if it turns out the fans aren’t buying such things, and the clarion call of WrestleCrap is heard once again, then I’ll be the first one to send these zombies and their ilk back to the grave. □

WIN, LOSE, or DRAW

BY HARRY BURKETT

GOOD VS. EVIL. Back when I was a kid, with no internet and starving for wrestling information, I often revisited my 1979 *Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia* to find the brief entry for “professional wrestling,” which featured a great black-and-white photo of Bruno Sammartino backdropping Ivan Koloff en route to losing the WWWF title in 1971. But I dreaded reading the actual entry because it went on to describe pro wrestling as “entertainment.”

It was unsettling information, to say the least. I chose to believe my own alternative facts.

Nevertheless, this authoritative source stated that “one of the contestants” usually assumed a “villainous attitude” while his “opponent wins the sympathy of the spectators by confining himself to orthodox wrestling holds, and in the end he usually triumphs over his tormentor.”

There have been journals and mainstream magazine articles that have analyzed the morality depicted by pro wrestling, whether it’s the glorification of violence, the exploitation of stereotypes, or, sometimes, the positive reinforcement of core values.

I was thinking about this as Amir Jordan literally cried on *NXT U.K.* because his former partner Kenny Williams—who had ruthlessly turned on Jordan a few months earlier—used an exposed turnbuckle and a steel chair to beat him in a match

stipulating the loser had to leave the brand. Jordan had sacrificed a lucrative business career to become a wrestler and is now facing shoulder surgery, and it’s an open question whether he’ll compete anywhere ever again.

Reality says it was logical for the dastardly Williams to defeat the ethical Jordan. So, I accept Jordan’s loss. But, whether Jordan returns or not, Andy Shepherd and Nigel McGuinness should continually remind viewers how Williams’ selfish actions cost his former friend his career.

Only a week earlier, another morality play had unfolded

on *AEW Dynamite*, as Sammy Guevara begged MJF not to throw Chris Jericho—the bloodied leader of the Inner Circle—off the top of the steel “Blood & Guts” structure. Guevara, actually dismissed at one point by Jericho (and the man who had talked the most trash going into the match), was willing to let his team take a loss in a gesture of loyalty and humanity.

Guevara surrendered, giving the Pinnacle a major win. MJF threw Jericho off the cage anyway.

Obviously, Jericho and his Inner Circle must avenge this loss. MJF, Wardlow, and FTR must be punished. AEW’s creative team has no choice but to book this so Good defeats Evil in the end.

But who made that rule? A couple of issues ago, I made the case for realistic grappling inside the ring. Shouldn’t this apply to angles, too? If wrestling should be a reflection of real life, then the good guys shouldn’t always win. Not every storyline should end perfectly, tied with a bow and a cherry on top. I know my life doesn’t work that way.



Sammy Guevara looks distraught after his partner, Chris Jericho, was thrown from the top of a steel cage by Pinnacle leader MJF. While the good guys (Inner Circle) will likely prevail in the end, Harry Burkett questions the wisdom of always punishing the bad guys.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

Ring of Honor's Brian Milonas sits with Caprice Coleman and Ian Riccaboni at the commentary table, where his broadcast partners would subtly convince him to embrace a more selfish worldview.

PHOTO BY RING OF HONOR/MIKE ADAMS



That's one reason I preferred the NWA to the WWF in the 1980s. Hulk Hogan and the baby-faces in the WWF would emerge victorious at the end of nearly every feud. Meanwhile, the Four Horsemen ran roughshod in the NWA as Dusty Rhodes, Magnum T.A., Ronnie Garvin, and other fan favorites enjoyed glorious—yet fleeting—moments in the sun.

If one side is allowed to break the rules and gang up on rivals in parking lots, then isn't that side usually going to win? Reality says yes. That's why the NWA was more realistic.

No, I'm not channeling Dan Shocket or Eddie Ellner and suggesting I want the bad guys to win. I'm saying that it's very realistic for bad guys to win, which makes it all the more important for announcers, authority figures, and other wrestlers to provide moral clarity.

Speaking of Jericho, he criticized WWE several years ago for fashioning Michael Cole into a heel and keeping him as its primary announcer. He maintained that the play-by-play announcer should portray the "voice of reason." He was correct. Cole's running heel commentary diminished the effectiveness of the good guys *and* the bad guys.

Ring of Honor fans will recall that The Bouncers lost a match to The OGK on television a few weeks ago, and The Beer City

Bruiser responded by smashing a beer bottle over Matt Taven's head and planting Mike Bennett with a DDT. His partner Brian Milonas was incredulous. He considered Taven and Bennett to be friends and assumed they'd all have beers after the match.

Beer City Bruiser distanced himself from Milonas over the next several weeks, taking on newcomer Ken Dixon as his partner. On a recent edition of *Ring Of Honor Wrestling*, Milonas sat in on commentary with Ian Riccaboni and Caprice Coleman as Bruiser and Dixon faced The OGK. Milonas expressed disappointment in Bruiser, but hoped his longtime friend would see the error of his ways.

Nice sentiment. Instead of commending Milonas for being a decent human being, Riccaboni and Coleman implied he was naïve, that he hadn't received the memo that Bruiser had moved on with a new partner.

"You're a big dude, and so is Bruiser," remarked Coleman. "Can you imagine if someone like you had an attitude and only cared about winning?"

Milonas held a firm grip on his moral compass, replying, "You can be a big dude and win matches, do things above board, and not do shady stuff to guys who don't deserve it."

The OGK took advantage of Dixon's inexperience to win the

match, and Taven gave Bruiser a receipt: smashing a beer bottle over his head. Milonas hustled to ringside, telling Taven that his actions were "uncalled for." In the heat of the moment, and probably with Coleman's prodding in mind, he told Bruiser that he'd been "right all along" and began punching, slapping, and kicking Dixon.

"Oh, he listened to us!" exclaimed Coleman. "He's like a mammoth on the loose!"

The ghost of Gordon Solie probably thought this was a sad turn of events for the young man. Coleman, however, was urging his heel turn. Coleman sometimes vacillates between straightforward and heel commentary, but he isn't firmly established as a heel announcer. He's actually an ordained minister, and I've found his "Dose Of Colemanism" column on Ring of Honor's website to be motivational and inspirational. Mixed messages, to be sure.

What gives?

This has been a recurring phenomenon in recent years. When WWE fan favorites throw opponents into the metal steps or plant them through the collapsing announcers table (obligatory at all WWE pay-per-views), Corey Graves and even Michael Cole will give these supposed baby-faces credit for doing "whatever it takes." Increasingly, a willingness to break the rules is equated with having the heart to win.

There's value in good defeating evil in all forms of entertainment. Personally, I'd rather read a dime-store Western novel with that predictable formula than become depressed by dystopian books and movies. It's human nature to want things to be right in the world, thank goodness.

If all of you want to keep professional wrestling a battle between good and evil, that's fine. But let's call out wrongdoing when we see it, okay? It will mean that much more. □

HOTSEAT

AN INCISIVE INTERVIEW WITH THE SPORT'S TOP STARS AND FIGURES



**BRITT
BAKER**

PHOTO BY JOHN SMOLEK

EVEN BEFORE AEW'S Double or Nothing event, an argument could have been made for Dr. Britt Baker, DMD, being one of the most interesting people in all of wrestling.

When she's not making herself smile by trapping opponents in her excruciating Lockjaw submission move, Baker is improving the smiles of patients at her private dentistry practice in Florida.

She's held down a relationship with NXT star Adam Cole for years, even when the two were competing for the same viewers on Wednesday nights.

And she's pals with Tony Schiavone.

But, if Baker wasn't already one of the most talked-about figures in the sport, she surely became one on the night of May 30, when she defeated Hikaru Shida before a packed crowd to become the fourth AEW Women's World champion.

It was the payoff for a year of hard work put in by Baker, who, over those 12 months, dedicated herself to improving her skills inside the ring, and crafting a character so obnoxious that it would surely rile up fans.

While Baker's on-screen confidence may border on delusional, in real life, the 30-year-old Pennsylvania native is a fiercely competitive, proud, and dedicated performer, with high expectations for her own future ... and that of the entire AEW Women's division.

Three days after winning the AEW Women's championship, Baker discussed her vision for the future in an interview with **PWI** Senior Writer Al Castle.

Castle: Congratulations. I imagine Sunday night had to be a high point in your career. Was it made all that much better by having fans in the building?

Baker: Oh, my God, yeah. Absolutely. And it was such an electric crowd. You can't explain it unless you're there. It was deafening—the crowd, the chants, the cheers, everything about it. It could almost make you emotional, because it was something we haven't heard for so long. It was almost like a forgotten feeling.

Castle: Was there any self-doubt in how fans were going to react to you? You could feel that you're the hot thing and the act is over, but it's hard to tell something is truly over if there's nobody in the building to cheer it.



Dr. Britt Baker, DMD, prepares to apply the Lockjaw to Hikaru Shida and capture the AEW Women's World championship.

Baker: The Friday night before, on *Dynamite*, I came out and cut a live promo. And what shocked me that night is, I ended the promo saying, "DMD," and the fans did it with me. That was the first time. It was so loud I couldn't even hear myself say, "DMD," because I could only hear the fans. That's when it kind of hit me. I was like, *Wow. They're really behind this.*

And then, obviously I'm so nervous before the pay-per-view. As soon as my music hit, I just heard that roar, and it was the best feeling in the world, because you never want to come out and have it be, like, no reaction whatsoever. You want to be booed. You want to be cheered. It was such a loud reaction. Then, toward the end of our match, it's like the stadium was shaking. That's how loud it was.

Castle: That's got to really feel special. You think about all the big moments in wrestling over the last year, and all the titles that have changed, and they've all happened in front of almost no one. You got to have this moment, I imagine, exactly how you pictured it.

Baker: You can't really plan to have a great reaction when you win a title. I think everybody hopes, deep down, that's what's going to happen. But I never planned in a million years that it would have been. These fans were incredible to me. And I'm really thankful for them, because they've been along for the ride with the growth of Dr. Baker, DMD. And now, it's unreal how much I feel the fan support. A year or two ago, it was constant

resistance. It was like, "We don't want her. We don't want her on our TV." And now, I truly feel like I'm an undeniable act on Wednesday night television.

Castle: As a bad guy, does it make it uneasy that there are so many cheers coming through? There's always that balance that a good heel has to find. You want to be over, but you also want to be hated, right? Do you feel you're at that sweet spot right now?

Baker: Yeah, because I didn't change anything about me. I still say what's on my mind in all my promos. I think if you met the Dr. Baker, DMD, character on the street, you wouldn't like her. It's very unlikable—borderline, dare I say, a bit like a b****. Arrogant. Delusional. But the fans, for whatever reason, have chosen to swing towards liking her. I feel that they just have so much respect for the work that I've put in during the last year.

I can truthfully say I don't think anybody has worked as hard as I have. I really went from being at the bottom, as far as women's



Baker raises the hand of then-champion Riho after a tag team victory on the second episode of *Dynamite*. Almost directionless as a babyface, Baker's heel turn would see her soar to new heights.



Dr. Britt poses with her loyal sidekick—and sometimes receptionist—"Reba" (Rebel).

talent, to being, arguably, the top. I don't think you can say "2021 Women's Wrestler Of The Year" without at least putting my name in the mix. I've come a long way, and I think fans are very respectful of that.

Castle: When you talk about all that work that you've put in over the last year, how much of it was concentrating on the character, the personality, which obviously is over like gangbusters? And how much of it was the work in the ring, which is where, over the last couple years, you've faced some criticism—especially surrounded by women like Hikaru Shida, who has got all this experience, and all this credibility, and this great reputation? Was it a conscious decision to prioritize one over the other?

Baker: Once the pandemic hit, I couldn't go to the dental office anymore. And I was fresh in this heel turn. So, I did nothing but professional wrestling, because I didn't have anything else to do. This was my time to just go to the wrestling ring nonstop. I was watching wrestling nonstop. Promos, matches ... everything. I was practicing

promos. I was bouncing ideas off of people who I consider my mentors in the back, nonstop. I was working day in and day out, because I wanted to be the best.

I really wanted 2021 to be my year. And I felt like I had it in me. I had everything. I just really needed to zone in and dig deep down and really get to know this Dr. Baker, DMD, character and own her. You have to own being a bad guy. If you're not comfortable with it, it comes off on the screen. You have to really, really, really accept this is who you are.

Castle: It's a bizarre question to ask, but how important to the act has Tony Schiavone been?

Baker: So much. Oh, my gosh. You can't say "Dr. Baker" to people without, in my opinion, Tony Schiavone—and Reba. Tony is just one of my best friends in real life. We talk on the phone all the time, even when we're not at television. And he's always been supportive of me, always been one of the cheerleaders in the front row from when I first heard him.

When we were doing promos together, I always felt like he was my safety net at all times.

And it kind of gave me a little comfort, because I was really nervous to do live promos, as anyone would be who has no experience doing it. But, in the back of my head, I was always like, "Hey, Tony Schiavone is here. He kind of knows what he's doing. This isn't gonna go off the rails too bad." Outside of that, he's always, always, always cheering me on, hyping me up before my matches, before my promos. And he just lets me degrade him on live TV, which he's such a good sport about. But, yeah, he's such an important person in my life, and, I think, to my success this year.

Castle: I imagine a turning point for you was the "Lights Out" match with Thunder Rosa. It was talked about as one of the most groundbreaking and best American women's matches on television—if not *the* best. Was that the goal going out there?

Baker: I actually think the turning point was a little bit before that, when the feud started,

AEW's resident dentist humiliates Thunder Rosa during their match at February's Beach Break special.





On the April 5 episode of *Dark*, an arrogant Baker can't resist cutting a quick promo before defeating Alex Gracia by submission.

because so many people were invested in this feud. And we had a match on *Dynamite*—just a regular wrestling match, no stipulations—that got a great response. And people still wanted more. They still wanted to see the feud. That's what carried all the momentum coming into the lights-out match. It's just our chemistry. Batman and the Joker. The villain and the hero.

That's something that's really hard to get in professional wrestling sometimes, that genuine, "Man, we love this feud." And we were very lucky that the fans stuck with it for so long, because we were building it for a long time. But then, once we heard, "Hey, you're going to be in a lights-out, unsanctioned match. And it's going to be the main event. You guys are the first female main event." All day, we knew we had the potential to make history and to do something that was talked about for a long time. And we knew what we had to do. So, we had everything in the palm of our hands. We just needed to deliver. And we did.

Castle: What is the process of getting ready for a match like that? I imagine anytime you're going into the ring, you've got to prepare to feel some pain, to potentially be hurt or injured.

When you're knowingly going into a match where you know you're going to go through thumbtacks and *really* be hurt, is it a different level of psyching yourself up?

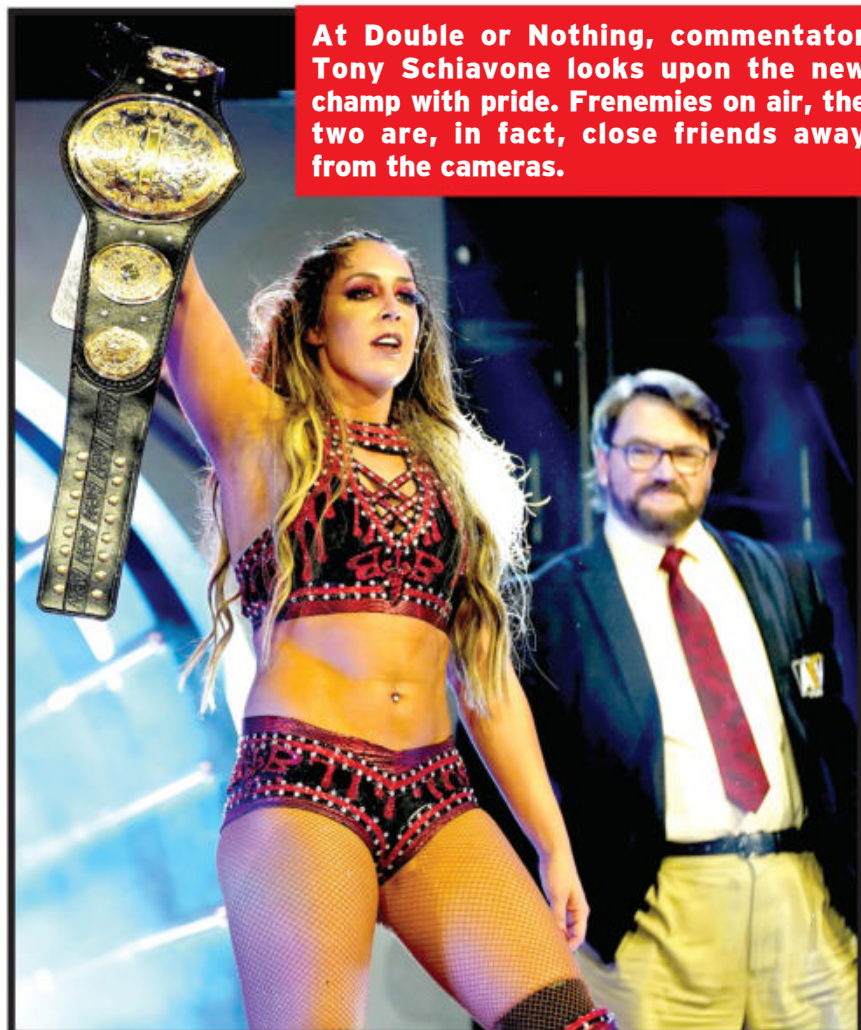
Baker: You're crossing into a whole new level of insanity. It's exactly what you just said. You just have to be prepared for pain. You know it's going to hurt. Everything is going to hurt. It's going to hurt early on, and it's going to hurt for the next 20 minutes that you're wrestling. It's going to hurt at the end. It's going to hurt the next two-to-three weeks after. But that's the match. That's what this match is: an unsanctioned, lights-out match. And it's the main event, so you have to do it. You have to go through the pain for the fans, for the story, for the moment that it is.

Castle: And then, going into the match with Hikaru Shida,

it's kind of a whole different situation, right? Is that, in some ways, even more of a challenge, because here's a woman who has this reputation for delivering this work rate?

Baker: The title match with Shida was just totally different for so many reasons. Because Shida is very beloved by the fans. She's been the champion during a difficult time. But I also feel like this is my time. And I definitely thought it was time to take over and time to prove why I say I'm the best—why I say this is a new era. And you can't say you're the best without showing you're the best. And you can't show you're the best without having a championship title belt around your waist. I needed to cap off this year with being the best. So, going into any match with any champion, I would have felt this kind of pressure. But, because she is so talented, she is so loved by the fans, there's definitely that added stress.

Castle: Beyond just being the titleholder and on-air representative for the Women's division, are



At *Double or Nothing*, commentator Tony Schiavone looks upon the new champ with pride. Frenemies on air, the two are, in fact, close friends away from the cameras.



March 17's unsanctioned battle between Baker and Thunder Rosa was about as barbaric as anything fans have seen on cable TV. The two women grapplers had to be ready to face some serious pain, whether it was Thunder Rosa being curb stomped onto a steel chair (left) or Baker taking a powerbomb into the thumbtacks she'd introduced (right).

you looking to take a real leadership role behind the scenes in driving the direction of the Women's division in AEW?

Baker: Yeah, and I think I kind of already have. Our Women's division, we have a lot of respect for each other at all times. We're always supportive of whoever's time it is at the moment. Right now is my time. And I definitely feel the support and the respect of all the women—actually, the entire roster. After the lights-out match with Thunder Rosa, we came to the back, and the entire roster was on their feet applauding us. That's such a good feeling at AEW, that you have the support of your peers.

Castle: Do you look forward to the day that you headline a pay-per-view?

Baker: Yeah, absolutely. There's so many women I can't wait to wrestle. I mean, Thunder Rosa and I, our chemistry is undeniable. We're going to wrestle again, probably many more times. And we'll probably try to kill each other

many more times. And the fans are so, so behind that. My viewpoints and opinions of her aside, I'm here to put on the best possible wrestling show and matches on the planet. If that's what the fans want, that's what we have to give them.

I've never locked up with Serena (Deeb), and she's one of the best technical wrestlers, period. Not male. Not female. Just period. She's so good. I've never wrestled Tay Conti, who is going to be a top female in this industry in the next year. We can go on and on all day with all the women I can't wait to be in the ring with.

Castle: When you talk about a rematch between you and Thunder Rosa for the title, that absolutely feels like a pay-per-view main event, and maybe one of the biggest matches that AEW can put together right now.

Baker: Absolutely. And everybody knows that. And Tony (Khan) knows that. It's something that has glaringly obvious, flashing red lights all over it.

Castle: I want to talk a bit about your other job. I wasn't aware that, during the pandemic, you couldn't be working in your private practice. I guess that makes sense.

Baker: There was a solid two months when I could only go in for emergencies. So, I'd go in at least a couple of times a week, but it wasn't the 10-hour, 12-hour days that I do now when I'm traveling all the time. It was just a lot of time to do nothing but focus on wrestling. I'm telling you, I was so laser-focused. I wanted to be the top female

of this year. That was my goal. I wanted to be the person that, when they talk about women's wrestling, my name comes up.

Castle: Did that make you reconsider whether you want to continue this other career? When you had that time to focus yourself fully on wrestling, as you just touched on, it paid off. Did that leave any questions in your mind as to whether you're stretching yourself too thin?

Baker: No, it doesn't. I always say that dentistry keeps me grounded and keeps me sane. Wrestling can really be a lot sometimes, on all fronts: physically, mentally. You get exhausted. And you get really overwhelmed sometimes, when great things are happening or when bad things are happening. But dentistry always keeps me in the real world. Now, I'm only working three days a week in the dental office. And that's by choice, because I want to have all this energy and time to dedicate to professional wrestling.



Dr. Britt's bloody visage during her and Thunder Rosa's no-holds-barred battle has graced t-shirts, gone viral on social media, and even appears in her entrance video. Seeing as Baker lost that encounter, one can only imagine she'll be out for revenge.

Castle: Yeah. How much do you think that's been part of your success? It is just such a quirky, interesting story: the wrestling dentist.

Baker: I think my story is interesting. It's charming. It's weird. It's confusing. But I hope it's admirable, because it has been really, really hard from the day I started training, the day I started dental school, until now being successful in both. And I know I wouldn't trade anything. I would have never done one or the other. I think it's really built who I am as a person in my work. My work effort into everything is times 100 now, and I think it's because I had to do that. I had to be constantly on the grind—in school and training to even get by, let alone be the best. So, now that I have a little bit more time to dedicate to each, because I'm not in school and I'm not in training, I'm so focused on being the best. I know that extra level I have to go to, that extra grind I have to put in.

Castle: The other part of your story that is obviously really interesting to a lot of people is your relationship with Adam Cole—especially when both brands (AEW and NXT) were on Wednesday nights. Was there any awkwardness in that at all?

Baker: No, not at all. We're very supportive of each other all the time. And, as far as both being on Wednesdays, neither of us was home on Wednesday nights anyway, so it didn't really affect our time getting to see each other. He watches everything I do. I watch everything he does. And it's really cool to have somebody at home that you can just sit down and talk about your whole day with. And they understand everything that you're talking about, everything that you're going through. And I feel very fortunate because he's one of the best in the world on promos and in wrestling. And I get to just, at the end of the day, come home to him and talk to him about anything.

Castle: Do you talk wrestling? I heard Bianca Belair talk about this the other day. She said that a lot of couples in wrestling make it a point not to talk about wrestling at home.

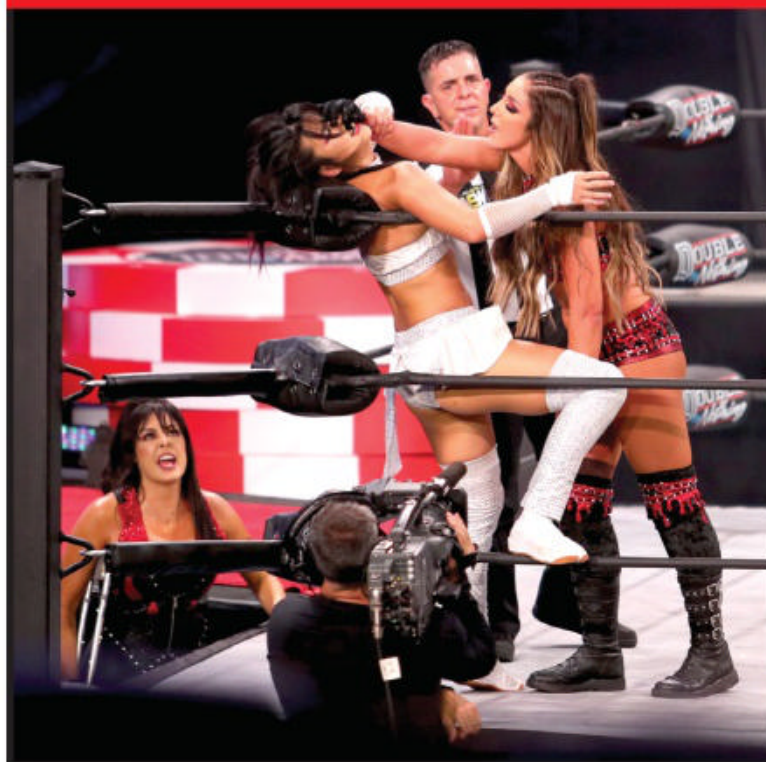
Baker: I'm a lot younger in the professional wrestling business than he is. This is only my fifth, going on sixth, year. So, I feel like I'm a lot more young, eager, super excited about everything, whereas he's more the veteran. He's more cool, calm, and collected about everything, all the milestones in his career. He's very chill about it all, where I'm, like, either super excited or super upset.

So, we definitely talk. It's just different energy levels coming from both of us. I'm years behind him, I guess you would say, in my career as far as wrestling. But it's really cool, because he's somebody that always gives a very grounded approach and advice to me.

Castle: What do you see in the immediate future for you, and for AEW?

Baker: I want to definitely keep riding the wave, because I feel a genuine excitement and passion from the fans right now. This is a new era. It's the era of the DMD. And I think they're excited for me. They're excited there's a new champ. And I represent the Women's division. So, if they're excited for me being the new champion, then they're excited for the Women's division. And I'm hoping that means they're watching our segments more. They're paying attention. And they're really getting invested into every single thing that I do and the Women's division does. I really, really, really want to take over right now—take over all of women's wrestling and be the top of the top. The best of the best. □

Baker takes the fight to Hikaru Shida as Rebel cheers her on. Always a compelling character and promo, she's devoted herself to becoming a technically proficient storyteller inside the ring. Now, she's ready to lead AEW's Women's division to the next level.



DOUBLE OR NOTHING IS AWFUL STAY



FULL COVERAGE & ANALYSIS OF AEW'S SIGNATURE EVENT

TEXT BY KEVIN MCELVANEY

PHOTOS BY JOHN SMOLEK

WRESTLEMANIA. WRESTLE KINGDOM. And now, Double or Nothing. Not since Starrcade has a North American promotion emerged with such a noteworthy annual wrestling card—one so immediately beloved by fans and critics alike.

As a publication entrusted with covering the sport fairly and thoroughly, we don't make claims like this one lightly. But the results speak for themselves. Even WrestleMania,

which has remained pro wrestling's premier event for nearly four decades, charted a 2-1 record out of the gate, with WrestleMania 2 being rather forgettable.

The inaugural Double or Nothing event in 2019—the first official pay-per-view from All Elite Wrestling—saw Chris Jericho take on Kenny Omega, the Young Bucks tangle with the Lucha Bros. over the AAA World tag belts, and a battle of brothers between Cody and Dustin Rhodes (voted Match of the Year by *PWI* readers).



"Hangman" Page attempts a moonsault as the delighted fans at Daily's Place look on.

Last year, Double or Nothing emanated, as this year's event did, from Daily's Place. With AEW talent acting as surrogates for the fans, making plenty of noise at ringside, this show was a cathartic experience for wrestling enthusiasts in the early days of the pandemic. It was a memorable show highlighted by the first Stadium Stampede match, the crowning of Cody Rhodes as the first-ever TNT

THE FANS ARE BACK!

With COVID-19 being slightly less of a factor in the U.S. than it was even a few months ago, AEW and WWE both elected to present their signature events in front of a live audience. In WWE's case, this was a reduced-capacity crowd at Tampa's Raymond James Stadium for WrestleMania, which still led to 40,000+ fans over the course of two nights. On May 30, AEW presented Double or Nothing at Daily's Place in Jacksonville, which has played host to the company's weekly TV shows and its 2021 Revolution PPV.

The difference between those previous AEW shows and this one? This time out, there was no reduction in capacity, with an estimated 5,500 fans filling the amphitheatre. Social distancing was not mandated, and, when cameras panned over to the crowd, it was common to see a majority of fans not wearing masks.

In fairness to both AEW and its faithful, vaccinations have greatly reduced the spread of COVID-19, to the point where the CDC has given the okay for vaccinated individuals to gather indoors unmasked. (State and local regulations, of course, do vary.) Additionally, numerous studies have suggested COVID-19 is far less likely to spread outdoors than it is inside—making Daily's Place a relatively safe place to witness live wrestling.

So, yes, there is room to debate whether or not a full capacity crowd was a good idea from a public health standpoint. However, from an entertainment standpoint, one thing remains clear: Fans help make professional wrestling better. The enthusiasm of the fans gathered at Double or Nothing enhanced the show's presentation on television, while giving the AEW roster more motivation to really bring it inside the ring.

champion, and the beginning of Hikaru Shida's reign as Women's World champion. Plus, Jon Moxley had his first high-profile defense of the AEW World title against the late Brodie Lee.

With the pressure on, this year's iteration of Double or Nothing continued AEW's solid track record of delivering on its marquee event in a big way. While no event is 100% perfect, this year's Double or Nothing was about as solid a show, from top to bottom, as wrestling fans could ask for.

Matt Jackson saves his brother Nick from Jon Moxley's DDT by using (what else?) a superkick.

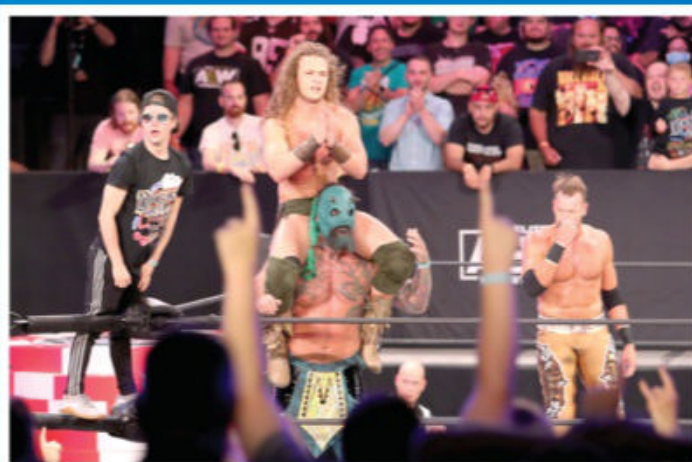


In this section, we'll attempt to document this major event both fairly and thoroughly, with high-quality photos throughout.

WHAT WENT DOWN

As is usually the case, the evening began with The Buy-In—a free program streaming on YouTube to encourage last-minute purchases of the main show. This time out, fans were treated to a World title match, as NWA Women's champ **Serena Deeb** successfully defended her title against former AEW Women's champ **Riho**.

With the live Jacksonville crowd sufficiently warmed up, it was time for the opening con-



The Jurassic Express celebrate Jungle Boy's victory in the Casino Battle Royale, as Christian Cage processes a difficult loss.



Cody Rhodes was saved by the bottom rope when it looked like Anthony Ogogo's uppercut might have him down for the count [above]. Rhodes would win the match after leveling Ogogo with a devastating Vertebreaker [below].



test—a grudge match between “Hangman” Adam Page and unofficial FTW champion Brian Cage. In a gentleman’s agreement, Cage honored Page’s request that his Team Taz allies, Ricky Starks and Hook, remain backstage.

Just ahead of the 12-minute mark, “Hangman” connected with his patented Buckshot Lariat and scored the pinfall victory. Afterward, he enjoyed a beer, which he toasted to the 5,000+ in attendance at Daily’s Place.

Up next, it was The Young Bucks defending the World tag team championship against rivals Jon Moxley & Eddie Kingston. The latter two entered the ring to “Wild Thing,” as performed by Los Angeles punk band X—a version famously used as entrance music by Moxley’s idol, death-match icon Atsushi Onita.

Matt & Nick Jackson, who were accompanied by their personal documentarian Brandon Cutler, were obnoxious as ever. The duo performed admittedly impressive offensive maneuvers on the challengers, but they couldn’t resist gloating whenever they got the chance.

Mox and Kingston, who have emerged as a capable tag team in recent months, proved to be tough challengers for the Bucks. After many, many nearfalls—maybe even too many, depending on your taste—the Brothers Jackson coun-

THE CASINO BATTLE ROYALE

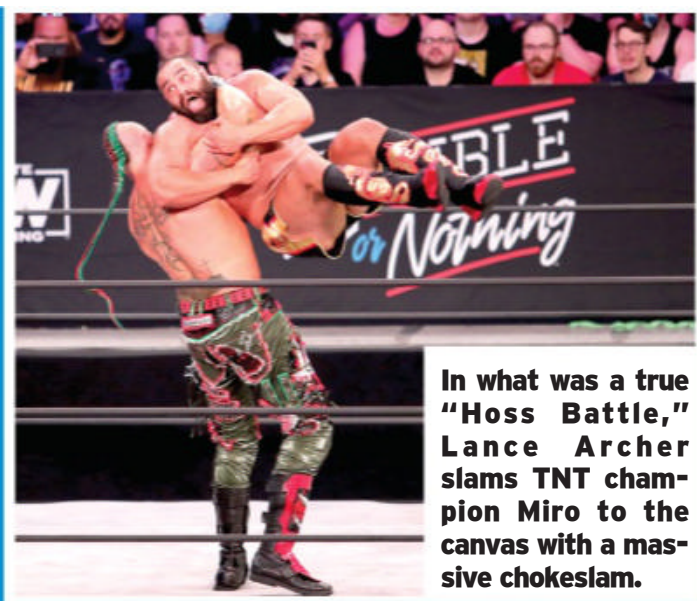
As is tradition, the Battle Royale saw wrestlers enter at timed intervals in groups of four, representing each suit in a deck of cards. The final surprise entrant is referred to as “The Joker.”

ORDER OF ELIMINATIONS:

- Max Caster eliminates Matt Sydal
- Christian Cage eliminates Caster
- Preston Vance eliminates Serpenticco
- Dustin Rhodes eliminates Nick Comoroto and Vance
- Powerhouse Hobbs eliminates Rhodes (after Comoroto interferes)
- Isiah Kassidy eliminates Colt Cabana
- Griff Garrison eliminates Anthony Bowens
- Matt Hardy eliminates Garrison
- Kassidy & Marq Quen eliminates Brian Pillman Jr.
- Lee Johnson eliminates Aaron Solow
- Hardy eliminates Johnson
- Pentagon Jr. eliminates Evil Uno
- Jungle Boy eliminates Pentagon Jr.
- Cage eliminates Hobbs
- Hardy eliminates Lio Rush (“The Joker”)
- Jungle Boy eliminates Kassidy
- Cage eliminates Quen
- Cage eliminates Hardy
- Jungle Boy eliminates Cage to win



A grateful Jungle Boy takes questions at the post-show press conference.



In what was a true "Hoss Battle," Lance Archer slams TNT champion Miro to the canvas with a massive chokeslam.

tered a Moxley DDT with four superkicks delivered in succession. Mox, astoundingly, sat up after a one-count. After taking out Kingston with a superkick to the knee, the Young Bucks rocked Moxley with four straight BTE triggers, picking up the pinfall. This was a thrilling, high-impact tag title bout, in keeping with previous AEW offerings.

A staple of AEW PPVs, the Casino Battle Royale, made its return at Double or Nothing. The wild, modified rumble rules match featured a good chunk of the full-time AEW roster, along with one surprise entrant (see sidebar on page 28). Despite **Matt Hardy** taking numerous shortcuts and nearly winning the whole thing, it would ultimately come down to **Christian Cage** and perennial fan favorite **Jungle Boy**. Jungle Boy was able to eliminate Cage, claiming a future World title shot against Kenny Omega (which occurred just after press time). Even if it doesn't prove to be a proper ascendance to the main event, this felt like a star-making moment for Jungle Boy, with the former world champion Cage giving him props afterward.

Next up, it was the U.S. versus the U.K., as **Cody Rhodes** faced Olympic boxing bronze medalist (and Nightmare Factory star pupil) **Anthony**

Ogogo. While not a rookie by *PWI* standards—he competed in his first match for the World Association of Wrestling back in 2019—Ogogo is, for all intents and purposes, in his salad days as a pro wrestler. Merely competing against Rhodes on pay-per-view was a really big deal for him.

The build-up to this match proved controversial, with Rhodes cutting a passionate, but slightly jingoistic, promo that earned him some criticism on social media. Nevertheless, the match was one of the most hotly anticipated on the card, with Ogogo looking to land a knockout punch on Rhodes—who, for one night only, adopted his late father's "American Dream" nickname.

With mentor **QT Marshall** in his corner, the slightly green, but immensely promising, Briton fought hard. He may have even scored the victory after landing a hard uppercut to Rhodes' jaw, if the veteran hadn't been lucky enough to land underneath the bottom rope. After busting out some surprising offense, including his version of **Daniel Bryan's** Cattle Mutilation hold, Rhodes connected with a Vertebreaker for the 1-2-3.

The TNT title bout between **Miro** and **Lance Archer** proved to be the shortest one of the night, lasting less than 10 minutes in total. This one felt like an odd fit in some ways, as neither Miro nor Archer really fit the mold of a classic babyface, and fans seemed divided about who to cheer for. (Though, at one point, Miro removed doubt by throwing a burlap sack that, in storyline, was meant to contain a python from **Jake Roberts'** personal collection.) Still, this was a smash-mouth encounter that no doubt pleased many old-school 'rasslin' fans. The Bulgarian brawler scored the knockout victory with a variation of his "Game Over" camel clutch, employing a body scissors for additional leverage.



The Women's World title bout between Hikaru Shida and Britt Baker was a strong contender for Match of the Night, with both women digging deep into their playbooks in attempts to defeat one another.



[Above]: Sting gets the hot tag from Darby Allin. **[Below]:** After the match, “The Stinger” calls out to his fans in Jacksonville.



Next, it was time for the Women’s World championship bout between **Hikaru Shida** and **Dr. Britt Baker, DMD** (who is the subject of this month’s “Hotseat” interview). Shida looked emotionally wrought as she hit the entrance ramp, no doubt thinking about the precarious position of her record-setting title run. Baker, who has emerged as the new face of the Women’s division, seemed ready to take the throne officially.

It’s no secret that AEW’s Women’s division has struggled in some ways. The company has faced criticism for not giving enough TV time to its female talent, with *Dynamite* rarely showcasing more than one Women’s match, even as the heavyweight and tag team divisions flourished. Recently, that has begun to shift somewhat, with Baker’s no-



Cassidy blocks Omega’s Snap Dragon superplex by putting his hands in his pockets, as PAC sends the champ flying with a release German.

holds-barred clash with **Thunder Rosa** memorably headlining the St. Patrick’s Day Slam special.

Barring an awkward moment, where **Rebel** accidentally throttled Baker with a crutch in full view of the referee, this match was one of the jewels of the card. Shida and Baker gave everything they had in the ring and ably countered one another’s signature moves. To her credit, the former Ice Ribbon star was consistently able to avoid her challenger’s signature Lockjaw submission ... until she wasn’t. Finally, a noticeably fatigued Baker managed to apply the Lockjaw, scoring the submission win and ending Shida’s reign at 372 days.

The next match marked the official in-ring debut of **Sting** in AEW, since his match at Revolution was a cinematic, pre-taped affair. This time out, Stinger teamed with his protégé, **Darby Allin**, to face the undefeated pairing of **Ethan Page** & **Scorpio Sky**. Predictably, Page took particular delight in torturing Allin, with whom he previously feuded on the independents. But the “highlight



Kenny Omega mocks Orange Cassidy, whom he considers unworthy as a challenger.

reel” moment was when the 62-year-old Sting performed a dive onto his opponents from the entrance ramp. The bout played to the strengths of all involved. It also didn’t seem like Sting was being overly protected here. And it was clear his timing was still impeccable, as the finish came when he expertly countered an inside-out cutter from Sky into a Scorpion Death Drop.

In the penultimate battle of the evening, **Kenny Omega** took on **Orange Cassidy** and **PAC** in a triple-threat. This was a wild one, with aerial moves and illegal maneuvers galore. Omega wielded his arsenal of title belts as a weapon, and PAC blatantly took down Cassidy with a low blow. The triple-threat rules prevented a DQ in all cases.

In some ways, PAC could have been seen as the favorite here—holding submission victories

TOP 5 DOUBLE OR NOTHING MOMENTS

1. Britt Baker captures the AEW Women's title.

This moment was a long time coming for Baker, who has proven without a doubt she can capably lead the Women's division to the next level ... whatever that might be. The "DMD Era" has officially begun!

2. Jungle Boy gets his shot.

Fans don't just sing along with Baltimora's "Tarzan Boy" because it's catchy—they do it because they're genuinely rooting for Jack Perry, the hardworking, charismatic underdog. Good on him for his big Battle Royale win.

3. Mark Henry is All Elite.

Long considered a WWE lifer, the Hall-of-Famer has signed on with AEW as a broadcast analyst on its forthcoming *Rampage* TV show. Henry brings a wealth of experience and knowledge with him, which can only be good for everyone in his orbit.

4. All Out will bring AEW back to Chi-Town.

The Chicago metro area played host to the original All In event, as well as AEW's inaugural All Out. It's fitting that the company will return there for its first PPV outside Jacksonville since 2020's Revolution (which, coincidentally, also took place in Chicago).

5. Anthony Ogogo is legit.

He may not have gotten the W on this particular night, but there's little doubt that the former Olympic champion has a bright future as a professional wrestler. His admirable performance against Rhodes is proof positive.

over both Cassidy and Omega in AEW. But it was Cassidy who had the momentum, along with the support of the live crowd. While OC was very much himself—slacker attitude on full display—he has been much quicker, as of late, when it comes to switching gears and taking his foes seriously.

For his part, Omega also had a ton of momentum, coming to the ring with world championship belts he'd collected from AEW, IMPACT Wrestling, and Lucha Libre AAA. He also had the backing of **Don Callis** who (shocker) couldn't resist interfering in the match.

In the closing moments, PAC seemed to have the championship within his grasp, as Cassidy



MJF, looking positively deranged, prepares an unsuccessful attempt to toss Chris Jericho off the balcony at Daily's Place.



Having lost last year's Stadium Stampede, the triumphant Inner Circle celebrates after winning the sequel.

began to lose consciousness in the Brutalizer (as he had at AEW Revolution 2020). Omega, unable to force PAC to break the hold, just flat out knocked referee **Bryce Remsburg** unconscious.

After Omega had laid out PAC with his various championship belts, Cassidy sprung to life and clobbered Omega with his Orange Punch. Referee **Aubrey Edwards** ran down to the ring to count the pin, only for Omega to reverse Cassidy's cover into one of his own. His title reign secure for another day, Omega celebrated with his Elite friends on the entrance ramp.

After that, it was time for the main event: the sequel to last year's popular Stadium Stampede. The festivities started at nearby TIAA Bank Field—home to the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars—before eventually spilling back into Daily's Place in the final minutes. This match was coming off the heels of the recent Blood & Guts match, which saw **The Pinnacle** defeat **The Inner Circle** in a brutal encounter on *Dynamite*. If The Inner Circle lost this time, they would be forced to break up.

Chris Jericho and his partners (**Sammy Guevara**, **Jake Hager**, and **Santana & Ortiz**) rappelled onto the gridiron, as the fans gathered at Daily's Place sang along to the strains of Fozzy's "Judas." After landing on the ground, the Inner Circle ran after **Maxwell Jacob Friedman**, who promptly hid in a limousine. This allowed MJF's partners, **Wardlow**, **Shawn Spears**, and **FTR** (**Cash Wheeler** & **Dax Harwood**) to mount a sneak attack.

Recounting the entire Stadium Stampede requires more space than we have here. But, like last year's offering, it gave fans a mix of comedy and brutality, with lots of brawling, and even a few celebrity cameos—including Jaguars head coach **Urban Meyer** and his assistant **Charlie Strong**, as well as former LAX leader **Konnan**, who elicited a loud response from the live crowd.

Once the action arrived at Daily's Place, it would be Guevara and Spears who decided the match ... and the fate of The Inner Circle. After a hard-hitting exchange, Guevara managed to hit a prone Spears with a 630 senton splash, securing the victory for his team. ■

DOUBLE OR NOTHING

THE SummerSlam

BOOK of LISTS!

A Special Look At WWE's Biggest Party Of The Summer

TEXT BY BRIAN R. SOLOMON

I'D BE LYING if I said I came up with this idea all by myself. You see, way back in the summer of 1993, as I recovered from my first year of college and spent my weeknights in the misery of a part-time insurance telemarketing job, I took solace—where else?—in wrestling magazines. And I'll never forget the October 1993 issue of *Inside Wrestling*, venerable sister mag to *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, and its "SummerSlam Book Of Lists." It provided a fascinating statistical look at what was then one of only five annual WWF pay-per-view spectacles—and to think, there had only been five SummerSlams held at the time the issue came out!

It occurred to me that, with the 34th annual summer event looming, it might be a good idea to revisit this very cool concept. After all, there's so much more ground to cover now. And, although there are now roughly four times as many annual spectacles (including NXT), there's still something special to me about SummerSlam. Maybe it goes back to the days when it marked the bittersweet end of summer vacation —BRS

The History Of SummerSlam

It all started back in 1988, when there had only been four WrestleManias. The first Survivor Series had just been presented the previous Thanksgiving, and the Royal Rumble had just begun as a special on the USA Network. In the days before monthly pay-per-views, if you wanted to see the major feuds and storylines pay off, you had to go to your local arena and see the action live.

That's the way the business model was set up. The storylines coming out of WrestleMania, for example, would be built up on weekly TV for many months, as the hottest matches would be kept off TV, and instead taken on tour to be witnessed live. Eventually, the powers that be decided that it would be a great idea to introduce a new pay-per-view, about half a year after *WrestleMania*, at which all those red-hot feuds could be settled on a larger stage. Things moved a lot slower back then—in more recent years, most post-WrestleMania angles are simply concluded the following month, such as this year at *WrestleMania Backlash*.

There was no question about where the first SummerSlam would be held. Although the WWF had gone national by the late-1980s, Madison Square Garden was still the "home arena" in a very real way. It had hosted the first *WrestleMania* in 1985, and it would do the same for SummerSlam three years later. That first show was built around a colossal main event pitting new WWF World champion Randy Savage and his Mega Powers partner Hulk Hogan against the man who had desperately been trying to take the title from both of them, "Million-Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase, and the person who had become a massive pawn in his evil game, Andre the Giant.

Instantly, SummerSlam was put on the map as one of the most anticipated events on the wrestling calendar. Just like *WrestleMania*, *Survivor Series*, and the *Royal Rumble*, it became an annual tradition. Although its significance may have diminished slightly in recent years, there's still a whole lot of history behind it, and that's well worth exploring ...



The October 1993 issue of *Inside Wrestling* was highlighted by the original "SummerSlam Book Of Lists," which proved to be formative reading for PWI Contributing Writer Brian R. Solomon.

The Hottest Matches

1991: MR. PERFECT VS. BRET HART

Ushering in a new era of excitement and athleticism, Curt Hennig and “The Hitman” showed that you didn’t have to be a superheavyweight to command attention, with this competitive and dynamic technical masterpiece for the Intercontinental championship.

1992: BRET HART VS. THE BRITISH BULLDOG

Proving he may have been “Mr. SummerSlam,” Bret Hart continued his incredibly high performance level with a modern classic against Davey Boy Smith for that same I-C belt he had captured the year before. With Diana Hart-Smith trying to broker peace between the brothers-in-law, this one had drama to spare.

1994: BRET HART VS. OWEN HART

The Hart Brothers’ rivalry was the talk of 1994, and Owen looked to duplicate his impressive win over brother Bret—this time for the WWF World title, and within the confines of a steel cage. Although he was unsuccessful in his effort, he did succeed in taking Bret to another unforgettable SummerSlam showing.

1998: THE ROCK VS. TRIPLE H

There must be something about SummerSlam and the Intercontinental title. This time out, it was a ladder match featuring two of the company’s young up-and-comers. Before another MSG throng, “The Great One” and “The Game” established themselves as ones to watch.

1998: STONE COLD STEVE AUSTIN VS. THE UNDERTAKER

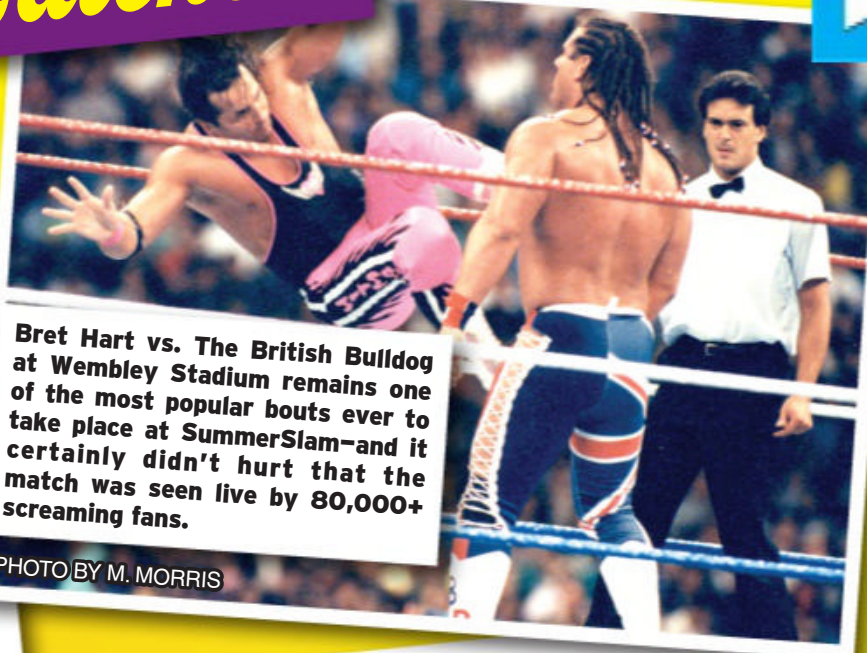
They called it the “Highway To Hell,” and with good reason. At the height of his war with Mr. McMahon, the “Rattlesnake” took a little break from pounding on the boss to settle a special beef with the “Dead Man.”

2000: EDGE & CHRISTIAN VS. THE HARDY BOYZ VS. THE DUDLEY BOYZ

No one will ever forget the first-ever Tables, Ladders, and Chairs Match. There’s a reason this match is still held today, but perhaps no one can live up to the standard set by the three tag teams that absolutely changed the game in the early-2000s.

Bret Hart vs. The British Bulldog at Wembley Stadium remains one of the most popular bouts ever to take place at SummerSlam—and it certainly didn’t hurt that the match was seen live by 80,000+ screaming fans.

PHOTO BY M. MORRIS



2002: SHAWN MICHAELS VS. TRIPLE H

He had been away from the ring for over four years, and doubts proliferated. But no ring rust was shown the night that HBK kicked off his tremendous comeback with a satisfying win over his former DX-mate in this unsanctioned streetfight.

2013: JOHN CENA VS. DANIEL BRYAN

Looking back now, it seems like a changing-of-the-guard moment—Daniel Bryan on the rise, the WWE Universe getting behind him, in an all-out war for the WWE World title against the man who had practically defined the previous ten years in the company. The “Yes” movement prevailed, but only for a moment, as Randy Orton cashed in his Money in the Bank briefcase to spoil the party.

2016: JOHN CENA VS. AJ STYLES

A dream match between the two men who had admirably represented their respective companies for years—Cena for WWE and Styles for TNA/Impact—this match was more than just symbolic. It delivered, and may have even been the greatest match of Cena’s storied WWE career.

2017: BROCK LESNAR VS. ROMAN REIGNS VS. SAMOA JOE VS. BRAUN STROWMAN

It gets no bigger than these four titans, doing battle in a fatal four-way for the Universal championship. They nearly obliterated the entire ringside area, but, when the smoke cleared, the “Beast Incarnate” walked away with the belt.

Popular Locales

These venues have hosted SummerSlam on multiple occasions ...

(6) STAPLES CENTER – LOS ANGELES, CA
2009 – 2014

(4) BARCLAYS CENTER – BROOKLYN, NY
2015 – 2018

(3) MADISON SQUARE GARDEN – NEW YORK, NY
1988, 1991, 1998

(3) BRENDAN BYRNE/CONTINENTAL AIRLINES/
IZOD CENTER – EAST RUTHERFORD, NJ
1989, 1997, 2007

(2) SCOTIABANK ARENA – TORONTO, ONTARIO
2004, 2019

SummerSlam's Biggest Crowds

1. SUMMERSLAM '92 (WEMBLEY STADIUM – LONDON, ENGLAND) – 80,355

2. SUMMERSLAM '93 (THE PALACE – AUBURN HILLS, MI) – 23,954

3. SUMMERSLAM '94 (UNITED CENTER – CHICAGO, IL) – 23,000

4. SUMMERSLAM '98 (MADISON SQUARE GARDEN – NEW YORK, NY) – 21,588

5. SUMMERSLAM '97 (CONTINENTAL AIRLINES ARENA – EAST RUTHERFORD, NJ) – 20,213

SummerSlam Celebs

Although WrestleMania is more known for its memorable celebrity appearances, the summer spectacular has also had more than a few classic moments. Here are some of the best ...

NOT THAT NEVILLE

The Lex Express may have been a bust at SummerSlam '93, with Lex Luger coming up short in his challenge of Yokozuna for the WWF World title, but it did give us one stirring rendition of the U.S. national anthem by Rock and Roll Hall-of-Famer Aaron Neville right before the match, complete with an introduction by Randy Savage decked out in red, white, and blue.

LESLIE NIELSEN HAMS IT UP

In the weeks leading up to SummerSlam '94, *The Naked Gun*'s Frank Drebin was charged with discovering the whereabouts of The Undertaker, who had gone missing some weeks earlier. Naturally, Nielsen's "investigation" went nowhere, but it did lead to a few laughs, especially when he was joined by *Naked Gun* co-star and sidekick George Kennedy the night of the show.

SWEETNESS SHOWS UP

That same night, Razor Ramon came to the United Center with a little backup in his bid to regain the Intercontinental title from Diesel. Countering the influence of "Big Daddy Cool's" pal Shawn Michaels would be none other than celebrated Chicago Bear Walter Payton, who made sure there were no shenanigans and allowed "The Bad Guy" to reclaim the strap.

THE ARROW SHOOTS STRAIGHT

The friendship between Cody Rhodes and Stephen Amell, better known as TV's Green Arrow, goes all the way back to Cody's days as Stardust in WWE. At SummerSlam '15, Rhodes first brought Amell into the ring for a tag team match pitting Amell and Neville (PAC) against himself and Wade Barrett. Amell's impressive performance left the door open for future crossovers.

THIS AIN'T THE DAILY SHOW

Popular comedian and political pundit Jon Stewart made a splash at not one, but two consecutive SummerSlams—first appearing in 2015 to lay out John Cena with a steel chair and help Seth Rollins achieve victory in the main event, and returning in 2016 to support The New Day against Luke Gallows and Karl Anderson.

The Rock and Brock Lesnar do battle at SummerSlam 2002, where Lesnar would begin his run as a main-event star by pinning "The Great One" for the WWE World title. Believe it or not, this was only the third world title change in the history of the annual summer event.

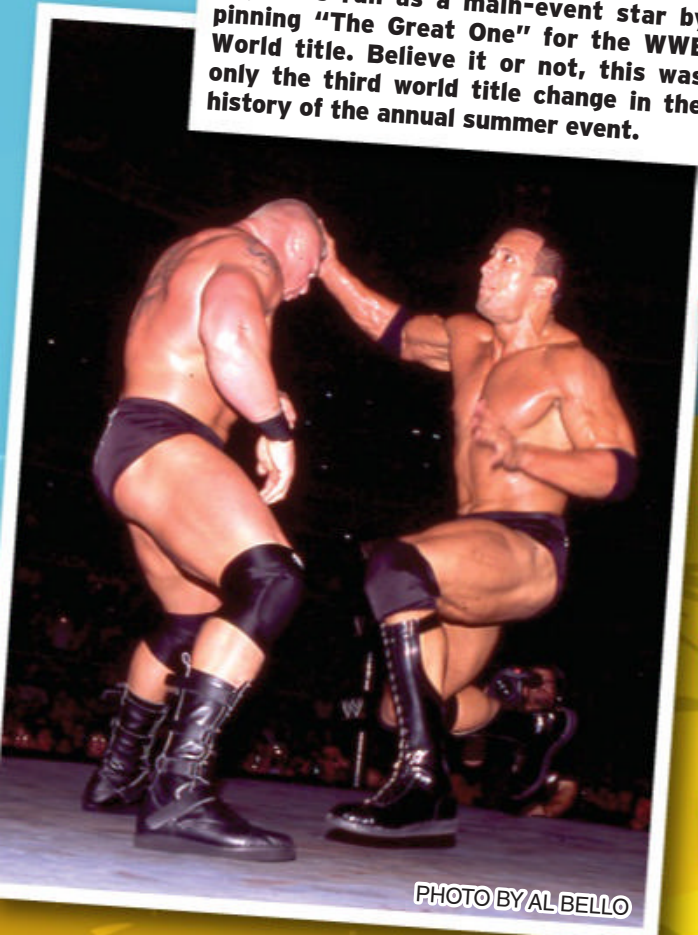


PHOTO BY AL BELLO

PHOTO BY BAHR



"Hey Ed, get a load of Nordberg. He just jumped into the passenger seat of that white Ford Bronco!" Leslie Nielsen and George Kennedy reprise their roles as Frank Drebin and Ed Hocken from *The Naked Gun* series in front of the live crowd at SummerSlam '92.

World Title Changes

In the early years of SummerSlam, seeing someone win a world championship was far from guaranteed. In fact, no one did it at all for the first 11 editions. And, on three of those shows, WWE's top title wasn't even defended! Here are the lucky individuals who have managed to win the big one at the biggest show of the summer ...

1999

With a returning Jesse "The Body" Ventura as special referee, Mick Foley became the first man to win a world title at SummerSlam, besting Triple H and previous champion Stone Cold Steve Austin in a triple-threat to emerge WWF champion.

2001

At the height of the WCW Invasion, The Rock dethroned Booker T to add the WCW World title to his growing resume.

2002

In a sign of the destruction he would one day wreak, a rookie Brock Lesnar crushed The Rock to win his first WWE World title.

2004

Another relative WWE newcomer, Randy Orton, toppled Chris Benoit to take the (now-defunct) World heavyweight championship.

2009

In a wild TLC match, CM Punk toppled Jeff Hardy to become World heavyweight champion.

2011

Alberto del Rio cashed in his Money in the Bank contract to snag the WWE World title from an exhausted CM Punk mere moments after Punk had just beat John Cena to solidify his undisputed claim to the belt.

2013

In a SummerSlam first, the WWE World title changed hands twice in the same night, as Daniel Bryan upended Cena for the belt, only to have Randy Orton kill the buzz by cashing in his Money in the Bank opportunity.

2014

In one of the most one-sided World title matches in WWE history, Brock Lesnar suplexed John Cena into oblivion on the way to capturing the gold.

2016

Finn Balor defeated Seth Rollins to become the first-ever WWE Universal champion—however, he would suffer an injury that would force him to vacate the very next day.

2018

After years of frustration, Roman Reigns finally got some satisfaction against Lesnar, defeating him in just a little over five minutes to become the Universal Champion.

2019

Making it two years of disappointment in a row for Lesnar, Reigns' former Shield partner Seth Rollins was the one to take the Universal title from "The Beast Incarnate" this time.

2020

Perhaps it was a blessing that there was no live crowd present to witness The Fiend's victory over Braun Strowman in a bizarre falls-count-anywhere match for the Universal title.

The Matches We'd Like To Forget

1988: THE JUNKYARD DOG VS. "RAVISHING" RICK RUDE

After a four-year run, JYD was on his way out of the WWF, and a shadow of his former self. Plus, Rude was embroiled in a classic feud with Jake "The Snake" Roberts at the time, so that's the match people wanted to see. This was memorable only for Rude's infamous Cheryl Roberts tights.

1990: THE ORIENT EXPRESS VS. HACKSAW JIM DUGGAN & NIKOLAI VOLKOFF

No one will blame you if you weren't aware that Nikolai Volkoff had a run as a fan favorite in the WWF. Once the Soviet Union went into collapse, so, apparently, did Volkoff's rulebreaking ways. Here, he formed a forgettable team with super-patriot Jim Duggan to steamroll the unfortunate Sato and Tanaka.

1992: VIRGIL VS. NAILZ

SummerSlam '92 at Wembley Stadium is perhaps the most fondly remembered one of all, but it certainly isn't because of this match. Take the failed fan favorite Virgil and put him in against one of the worst performers in WWE history, and you get this snoozefest.

1993: YOKOZUNA VS. LEX LUGER

After Hulk Hogan's departure from the WWF, it looked like Luger might be his replacement as the company's new superhero—that is, until his summer-long buildup for the WWF World title fizzled out in a countout victory that left fans scratching their heads.

1994: UNDERTAKER VS. UNDERTAKER

The less said about this—one of the most infamous "feuds" in wrestling history—the better. Brian Lee got drafted to play an imposter 'Taker, led by Paul Bearer in an ill-fated attempt to supplant the genuine article.

1995: DIESEL VS. KING MABEL

When people talk about the doldrums of the mid-1990s WWF, this is exactly the kind of match they're talking about—easily the most forgettable World title bout in SummerSlam history.

2000: THE KAT VS. TERRI

If you really need to know just how far the Women's division has come, all you need to do is check out this jaw-dropping travesty between two women who weren't even known as wrestlers, clearly put in the position of titillating the male audience, with the revolting stipulation being that you had to perform a stinkface on your opponent to win.

2003: SHANE MCMAHON VS. ERIC BISCHOFF

File this under: Does anyone even remember this happened? In the continuing saga of Bischoff's ritual humiliation in WWE came this debacle, which was "highlighted" by outside interference from Jonathan Coachman.

2007: THE GREAT KHALI VS. BATISTA

Why Khali's run as World champion even happened is anyone's guess, but it was clear from the start that he wasn't capable of much. Batista was the kind of wrestler who really needed the right opponent to have a decent match, which wasn't the case here. A mercifully short encounter with an anticlimactic DQ loss for the "Punjabi Giant."

2013: KANE VS. BRAY WYATT

Wyatt was new on the scene here, and clearly had great promise, but this Ring of Fire Match wasn't exactly a great showcase for it. Remembered mainly for how the "Big Red Monster" and the future Fiend spent most of it trying not to get fried, there wasn't much in the way of action in this one.

The Kat (pictured with Al Snow) awaits her opponent, Terri Runnels, ahead of their infamous "Stinkface Match" at SummerSlam 2000. While both women were compelling as managers, neither were seasoned grapplers, making this short gimmick bout seem especially tasteless two decades later.

PHOTO BY VERN VERNA



SummerSlam Streaks?

Yes, we all know that The Undertaker had a hell of a run at WrestleMania, but who has the best win-loss record in the history of SummerSlam? Here are the top five ...

EDGE (11-2) The Rated-R superstar once captured the Intercontinental title at SummerSlam, and has appeared twice in the main event. There was the big TLC match in 2000, plus his win in a vicious no-DQ match with Eddie Guerrero in 2002, a stacked triple-threat with Chris Jericho and Batista in 2004, his victory in the heated Matt Hardy rivalry that culminated in 2005, a successful WWE World championship defense against John Cena in 2006, and many more triumphs.

HULK HOGAN (6-0) It's no shock that the man with one of the greatest WrestleMania records of all time would also have one of the best SummerSlam records—and, in fact, the longest undefeated streak at the event. Hogan was almost unbeatable (especially during his 1980s-'90s run in the WWF) and even added a couple more wins in his 2000s comeback—including his infamous match with Shawn Michaels in 2005 and against Randy Orton the following year.

THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR (5-0) Hogan's fellow 1980s-'90s WWF superhero had a similarly successful run at SummerSlam, including his 1988 squash of The Honky Tonk Man for the I-C title, and his 1990 cagematch against Rick Rude—the first successful defense of the World title at SummerSlam. He capped it off with an iconic row against WWF champion Randy Savage at Wembley that saw him land the countout victory, but not the title.

THE UNDERTAKER (10-5-1) No one has competed at more SummerSlams than he has, which makes his record all the more impressive. Maybe not quite as impressive as his WrestleMania record ... but, really, what is? And although those 10 wins include the likes of Kamala, "Fake" Undertaker, Test, A-Train, Kama, and Giant Gonzalez, they also include Edge and Brock Lesnar. Not too shabby for a dead guy.

CHARLOTTE FLAIR (4-0) Yes, the darling of the Queen City is good enough to be in this company. The owner of the longest SummerSlam undefeated streak on the current WWE roster, her impressive resume includes two championship victories, as well as wins over Sasha Banks and Hall-of-Famer Trish Stratus.

See You Next Summer!

And, finally, in a related stat, here are the stars who have made the most SummerSlam appearances over the years ...

THE UNDERTAKER (16)
RANDY ORTON (15)
JOHN CENA (14)
EDGE (13)
TRIPLE H (13)
BRET HART (11)
CHRIS JERICHO (11)
KANE (11)
SHAWN MICHAELS (11)
BROCK LESNAR (10)
CHRISTIAN (9)
DOLPH ZIGGLER (9)
REY MYSTERIO (9)
CM PUNK (8)
KOFI KINGSTON (7)
THE BIG SHOW (7)
SETH ROLLINS (7)

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Trish Stratus tries and fails to submit Charlotte Flair with her own move during their intergenerational dream match in 2019. Including this contest, Flair is 4-0 at SummerSlam—giving her the longest undefeated streak of anyone on the current WWE roster.

The Ungovernable Naito

TEXT BY WALTER YEATES

MR. "TRANQUILO"
GETS SERIOUS
ABOUT HIS
FRIENDS, FOES,
AND FUTURE ...



t

HE LEADER OF Los Ingobernables de Japon (LIJ), Tetsuya Naito, has become a box office hit around the world. He produces the highest merchandise sales of any New Japan Pro-Wrestling talent, along with being a multi-time former IWGP tag team champion (heavyweight and junior heavyweight), six-time IWGP Intercontinental champion, and three-time IWGP heavyweight champion.

His successes don't stop at championship victories. Naito also captured the New Japan Cup in 2016, along with winning the prestigious G1 Climax tournament in both 2013 and 2017—making him one of the most decorated wrestlers in the history of NJPW.

Despite his popularity, fans in the West may not be aware of some of the more intricate details surrounding Naito's career ... nor what goes on in his mind. It's worth going back to the beginning, when Naito initially began training under former NJPW roster member (and famed amateur wrestling trainer), Animal Hamaguchi.

"It was a lot of fundamentals. Mat grappling and sparring, and establishing physical strength. Squats, push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, and bridging exercises. Simple, but incredibly strict," Naito told *PWL*. "In the end, though, I trained there for five years. And then, when I joined the NJPW Dojo, I never once found myself in any trouble at all. That's how well Hamaguchi Gym prepared me."



Tetsuya Naito connects with Destino on Kota Ibushi at this year's Wrestle Kingdom event. The bout would end Naito's second reign as IWGP "Double Champion," but he remains a top player for NJPW.

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PHOTO BY BRUNO SILVEIRA/RING OF HONOR

Clutching the IWGP Intercontinental title belt, Naito makes his way to the ring at Madison Square Garden. American fans have long adored the LIJ leader, buying his merchandise in droves and traveling long distances just to see him compete.

Naito would eventually go on an excursion to North America, competing in Total Nonstop Action (now IMPACT Wrestling) and Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre (CMLL) in 2009. He shared some interesting thoughts about his time away from an NJPW ring.

"Well, I always grew up loving New Japan Pro-Wrestling, and not necessarily other promotions. So, to be honest, I wasn't all that wild on going overseas at first," he admitted. "I was representing NJPW internationally, so it was on me not to embarrass myself or the company. I couldn't go over there and have fans thinking 'So, this is all the NJPW guys can do?' So, I put all I had into all my matches and hoped that some of those TNA and CMLL fans associated NJPW with Tetsuya Naito, and in a positive way."

Despite NJPW having a long relationship with CMLL, the company has yet to tour Mexico and take advantage of the numerous arenas CMLL owns. Naito was remarkably candid about his interest in returning to CMLL after COVID-19, should that ever be asked of him.



Back in 2013, “Red Shoes” Unno raises the hands of Naito and La Sombra (Andrade) after a victorious effort. Naito credits Mexico broadly—and his former tag partner, specifically—with helping make him the performer he is today.

“CMLL is really the birthplace of the Tetsuya Naito you see now,” he said. “Without my experiences there, I wouldn’t be where I am today. So, if it’s any aid to CMLL at all, I’m happy to get in that ring anytime.”

Of course, it was in Mexico where Naito first aligned with the Los Ingobernables faction that’s brought him attention around the globe. And, for his part, he would love to see New Japan tour the country. “Yeah, sometime it would be great to bring NJPW to the Mexican fans,” Naito said, adding, “It’s got to be in Arena Mexico!”

The connections to Mexico don’t end there. In the 2013 and 2014 World Tag League tourneys, the future headliner teamed with La Sombra (“El Idolo” Andrade), who is now free from corporate restrictions. “If he hadn’t invited me into Los Ingobernables, I wouldn’t be where I am today,” said Naito. “He really looked out for me. So, if he wants to step into an NJPW ring again, there is always a spot for him in Los Ingobernables de Japon.”

He continued: “When you see that Los Ingobernables de Japon pose, us beating our chests and raising our right fists, that means that all of us are connected in spirit, even if we are apart. I’m looking forward to the day where we can fight alongside one another, or opposite each other, for that matter.”

Naito had previously found success partnering with Yujiro Takahashi, as NO LIMIT. Together, the duo captured the IWGP

heavyweight and junior heavyweight tag titles—the first championships of his career. “Before I got started, I had that image of a pair of young guys teaming up and helping bring about a new era of sorts,” Naito recalled. “Just, maybe we were a little lacking in communication down the line. Maybe we could have done even more together ... perhaps.”

The Tokyo native’s career reached a new high in 2013, when he defeated Hiroshi Tanahashi in the G1 Climax 23 finals. Was this the proudest moment of his career?

“I’d admired Tanahashi since I first came into NJPW,” said Naito. “So, when I was able to beat him to win G1 Climax 23, I thought, at the time at least, *This is*



An early career highlight came when Naito defeated “The Ace,” Hiroshi Tanahashi, in the final of the 2013 G1 Climax. He’d win the tournament again four years later, after beating Kenny Omega.





PHOTO BY BRUNO SILVEIRA/RING OF HONOR

The “Tranquilo” athlete executes a breathtaking poison rana on Kota Ibushi. Naito is beloved for his charisma and sense of humor. But, at his best, he boasts more versatility and fighting spirit than just about anybody.

going to be the peak; this is going to be the match I remember the most about all this when it’s over ...”

As it turned out, it was only the beginning. “But then, I got together with Los Ingobernables, and I won the IWGP heavyweight title, and I won G1 Climax 27, and had plenty more moments and matches that were more memorable still. So, it isn’t the match I’m the proudest of in my career anymore, but it was still a very important moment to me in my career and my life in general.”

Speaking of memorable matches, there are a few more Naito has in mind. One is the canceled high-profile bout scheduled for the 2020 NJPW Anniversary Show, which would’ve seen him defend his “Double Championship” (IWGP heavyweight and Intercontinental titles) against then-junior heavyweight champion Hiromu Takahashi. Though New Japan is back to producing shows, Takahashi has been sidelined with a shoulder injury. Is this postponed match something we’ll see as soon as possible?

“I’d been guiding Hiromu through his career since before he even debuted,

so I always wanted to face him at least once,” Naito lamented. “Then, we had that big announcement, our first match together, both of us champions, it seemed too perfect, too good to be true ... and you know what happened. Of course, I want that match to happen. But it isn’t a ‘soon as possible’ thing. The timing has to be just right. So, when might that be? Tranquilo! Assen na yo.” (Translation: “Relax! Calm down.”)

As the conversation neared an end, Naito was asked about one more opponent—AEW’s Chris Jericho—and what his thoughts were several years after facing the international star. “Before I faced Jericho, I really didn’t know all that much about him. I knew he was pretty famous, but that’s about it,” Naito began. “But, through the matches we had, I learned a lot from him. Not just in the ring, but outside of it, too. I’m grateful for that. So, I’ll say this: Gracias, amigo. I think he enjoyed himself, too, so, anytime he wants to play with Tetsuya Naito again, he knows to find me here in NJPW. I’ll be more than happy to oblige.” ■



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While the feud between Naito and Chris Jericho got pretty ugly, the NJPW star insists he learned a lot from “The Demo God.” And he’s more than ready to face him again, should the opportunity present itself.

"YOU ARE WITNESSING THE **REAL** ROMAN REIGNS"

An Inside Look At The Shared Hustle Of Paul Heyman And Smackdown's "Tribal Chief"

"The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him." —Machiavelli

TEXT BY JASON McVEIGH

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As Paul Heyman looks on in horror, Roman Reigns pins Brock Lesnar in the main event of 2018's Royal Rumble show. Who would have thought that only three years later, a heel Reigns would be leading Smackdown with none other than Heyman by his side?



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

IF NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI were alive today, instead of the 16th century, then there is a good chance that he would be spending his Friday nights watching *Smackdown* on Fox. Indeed, his particular brand of philosophy—based on achieving one's goals at any cost—lends itself quite well to wrestling in general, but in particular to the WWE Universal champion, Roman Reigns. Since his surprising return to WWE last summer, Reigns has cut a swath through the blue brand that could only be described as Machiavellian. Initially, this new attitude was unlike anything we had ever seen from Reigns. But it wasn't long before things began to make more sense, when it was revealed that the former Shield member had been seeking counsel from a man whose entire career could be described as Machiavellian: Paul Heyman.

At first, this association may have seemed like strange bedfellows. But, dig a little deeper, and you begin to see that the seeds of this relationship were sown several generations before, through Heyman's dalliances with other members of the Anoa'i-Fatu family and their extended kin. When *PWI* caught up with Heyman, however, he was quick to reject the idea that Reigns is just another member of this storied lineage.

"What makes Roman Reigns special is his complete mind, body, and soul commitment to making every single moment a testament to his quest to be the greatest of all time," Heyman proudly professed. "And what I love about working with Roman Reigns is that he is not intimidated

by the idea of carrying the weight of what it takes to have a Hall-of-Fame, all-time great career in this industry."

As the newly christened "Head Of The Table," Reigns let it be known that no one, not even family member Jey Uso, was exempt from bending the proverbial knee on his path to an all-time great career. After multiple intense battles with his cousin, Uso fell in line behind the Universal champion . . . like much of the Smackdown roster has done since then. As the "Special Counsel To The Tribal Chief," Heyman no doubt deserves some credit for the success his alliance with Reigns has produced. But, when quizzed on it, he is quick to deflect the praise.

Heyman said, "As long as we have absolute knowledge that the vision of what we are doing and where we want to go takes priority, and that we are subservient to that vision over our own ego and humility, then how we get there is simply a morphing of the personalities of Roman and I in pursuit of that."

Indeed, the ease with which the morphing of these two personalities has occurred speaks volumes about the similarities between these two men. On the surface, Reigns and Heyman may appear to have little in common. Underneath, you will find the same dogged determination that has been the hallmark of both men's lives from a young age—Heyman hustling his way into (and up through) a notoriously difficult business, then creating a counterculture phenomenon in Extreme Championship Wrestling; Reigns' success in battles



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Heyman clutches the freshly signed contract that allowed Reigns to enter the main event of Payback in its final moments, quickly capturing the Universal title.

against college football stars, wrestling legends, and, undoubtedly biggest of all, leukemia. Though their paths were markedly different, the shared work ethic is what makes this bond such a fascinating one.

"To achieve the things that we want to, the odds are dramatically against us," Heyman said with a knowing smile. "But this is what makes us dare to dream in the

At Halloween Havoc '89, a young Paul E. Dangerously interferes on behalf of his charges, The Samoan S.W.A.T. Team. Heyman downplays his past with the Anoa'i-Fatu family, choosing to focus on "The Tribal Chief's" present goals.

AN ALLIANCE OF ONE

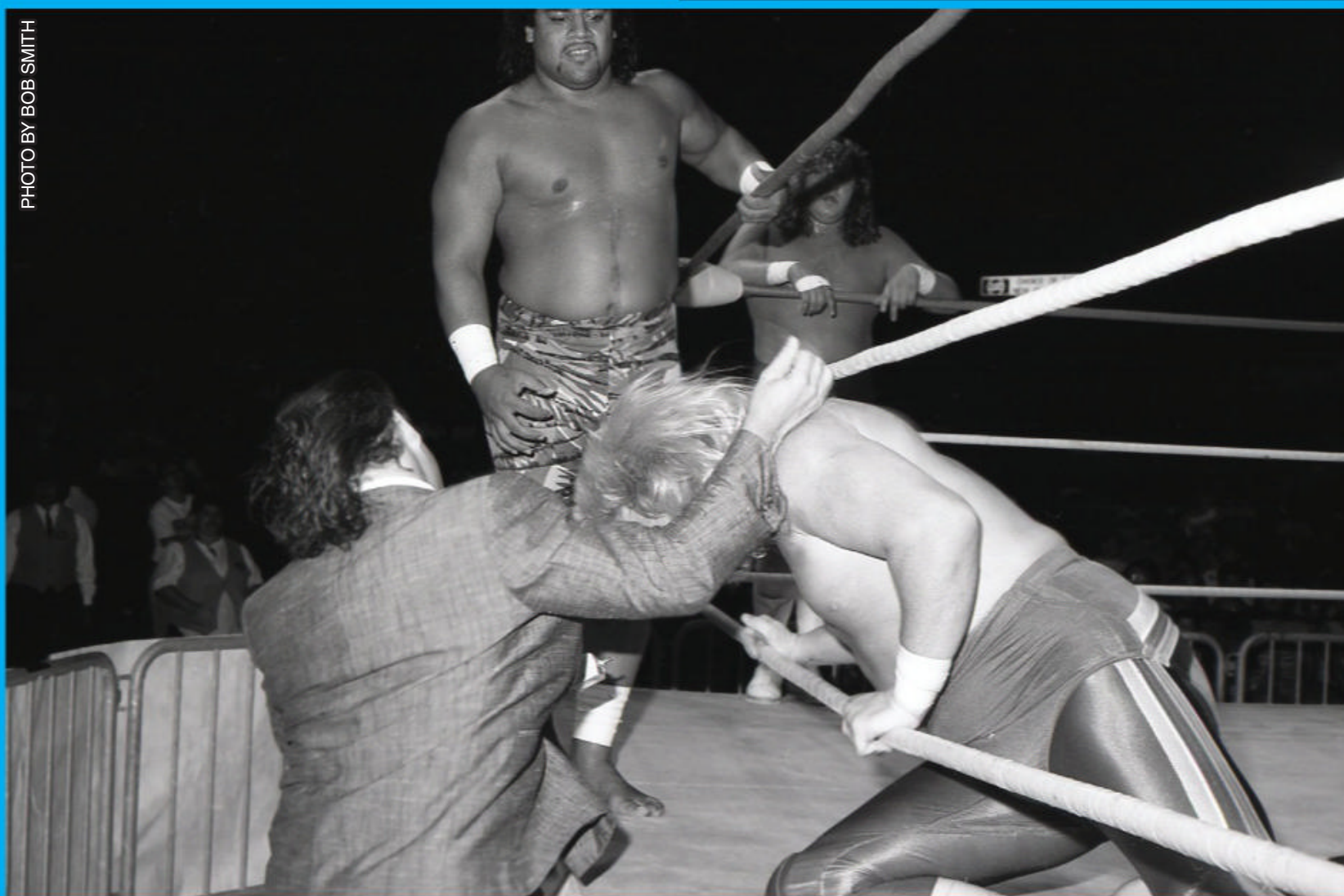
PWI asked Paul Heyman to provide five names he thought were worthy enough to make up a new Dangerous Alliance. The only caveat we gave him was that he could not say Roman Reigns. His answer was a unique, if not surprising one.

"Five names for a new Dangerous Alliance," Heyman mused. "And I can't say the name, 'Roman Reigns?' Okay. Here are the five names ..."

1. "Tribal Chief"
2. "Head of the Table"
3. "The End-All/Be-All"
4. "Universal Champion"
5. "The Sun In Which The WWE Multi-Verse Revolves Around"

"There is a Dangerous Alliance in the WWE today," said Heyman. "And that alliance is the one-two punch offered by the 'Tribal Chief' and undisputed Universal champion of the world, Roman Reigns, and his 'Special Counsel' Paul Heyman."

PHOTO BY BOB SMITH





Even Jey Uso, who grew up with Reigns, was repeatedly beaten by his real-life cousin until he agreed to toe the line. While fans scratched their heads at Reigns' seemingly new attitude, Heyman insists the man we're seeing now on *Smackdown* is, in fact, the real Reigns.

first place. And Roman has such unwavering belief in what we can do together that he hasn't just promised the world or the universe, but rather the *multi*-verse, that we will do it. And, in my opinion, so far, he has under-promised and overdelivered on that."

With the sheer dominance that Reigns has displayed over the past year, it is hard to argue with Heyman's assertion. The literal stacking of the bodies of Edge and Daniel Bryan en route to retaining the Universal title in the main event of *WrestleMania* was just one of many displays of Reigns' in-ring dominance—begetting natural comparisons to Paul E's relationship with another dominant champion, Brock Lesnar.

"What I love about Roman Reigns is that he is uninhibited in his confidence that the body of work he and I can put together will top the body of work of Brock and I," Heyman said. "And I don't know if there is anyone else in professional wrestling who has the confidence or the substance to make statements like that besides Roman Reigns."

When pushed about whether there are any similarities between Reigns and Lesnar—or, indeed, anyone whom he has managed in the past—Heyman ponders for a moment.

"The only similarities in working with a Brock, or a Steve Austin, or the ECW locker room, to Roman is the violent honesty that we all share in

the pursuit of the greatness that we desire."

As morally questionable as some of his actions have been, there is no denying that Reigns, with Heyman by his side, is the undisputed ruler of *Smackdown*. And watching Roman reign over Friday nights has made for compelling television.

It has also been a breath of fresh air for WWE and its fan base—many of whom have longed to see this side of the Universal champ. As someone who knows "The Tribal Chief" better than perhaps anyone, family included, Heyman reckons that what we are seeing is the authentic Reigns.

"Right now, *Smackdown* is the greatest reality show on television today, anywhere in the world," he said. "Because

what you are witnessing is the real Roman Reigns unfolding in front of your eyes each and every week."

And, while the *real* Roman Reigns may be bad news for the other wrestlers on *Smackdown*, it's certainly great news for those of us who have been watching. Somewhere, we reckon Machiavelli himself might be getting a kick out of it, too. ■

Even Brock Lesnar never beat Daniel Bryan and Edge at the same time! As Reigns' "Special Counsel," Heyman believes that, if anyone can show more dominance than Lesnar in WWE, the "Head Of The Table" is the man to do it.



The **10TH** **WONDER** *of the* **WORLD**

**AEW's Silver-Haired
Sensation Is Destined
For Gold**

Text By Candace Cordelia Smith

Jade Cargill has the look, skill, and determination to become a top star. And, less than a year after her debut, she's been positively dominant. Britt Baker, Serena Deeb, and the rest of the AEW women's division had better watch out!



PHOTO BY SADIEL "SPEEDY" RUIZ/AEW

DURING SEVERAL EPISODES of All Elite Wrestling's *Dark* broadcast on YouTube in 2020, there was a striking, silver-haired woman seen observing the in-ring action from the sidelines. Fans quickly took notice, asking in the comments section who she was. Then, in what appeared to be a ready answer from the universe, the same woman made her head-turning weekly television debut on AEW *Dynamite* in November. Leaving Cody Rhodes speechless and confirming a shocking alliance with none other than four-time NBA champion Shaquille O'Neal, this woman inarguably snatched and solidified her place on the All Elite Wrestling roster.

That woman's name is Jade Cargill ... and she's just getting started.

Like many wrestlers, Jade's love of the sport began as a child. Growing up in Vero Beach, Florida, the first match she saw on television involved The Rock. "I came around throughout the Attitude Era,"

she said. Still, it's not lost on Jade's ardent followers that the icon who "stuck out" to her most was the late Chyna. "She had me hooked," said Cargill. "I was

watching. I was eager to see when she would come out again. And it's kinda what got me into wrestling, along with my brother who is a huge wrestling fan."

Besides eagerly watching The Rock and Chyna's latest moves inside WWE's squared circle, Jade dabbled in wrestling her twin sibling. "We would play around in the yard, and then try to break each other's face and just have fun with it," she recalled. "I was one of the guys growing up, so I had to fight to keep my spot. And it was fun. It made me the woman I am today."

It's no secret that Cargill's athletic background includes a successful run in collegiate basketball. But her Master's degree



Jade Cargill applies a vice grip on the 6'1" KiLynn King, leaving her opponent at her mercy.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

With her size, strength, and natural charisma, Cargill has understandably drawn comparisons to the legendary Chyna. As a child, the rising AEW star took a great interest in the "Ninth Wonder Of The World."



PHOTO BY SADIEL "SPEEDY" RUIZ/AEW



PHOTO BY BILL APTER



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

Red Velvet learns the hard way that, despite her relatively limited experience, Cargill packs a serious punch. The Florida native has scored two pinfall victories over Red Velvet, including in this mid-April singles bout.

in Child Psychology also comes into play. “I’ve always loved kids,” she told *PWI*. “They’re innocent beings. They do things just based off of what they see. And they’re interesting ... they don’t really know what they’re doing, they’re just imitating what they see. I just love the study of the mind and how people react, or don’t react, to things.”

In-ring psychology is undoubtedly one of the cornerstones of wrestling, and the 5’10” superstar uses her knowledge of the human mind to enhance her character. “I’m learning how to play with people’s emotions, how to get people riled up, how to feed into

The undefeated rookie launches Dani Jordyn with a release German suplex in their brief encounter on *Dynamite*. Predictably, this bout also ended with Cargill’s hand raised in victory.



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

people’s emotions. To tell a good story,” Cargill said. “It’s very interesting how I can apply that background [child psychology] to it and understand, *Okay, this is why you need to do this, and this is why this spot is most important, and why you need to do this move at the end.* It all goes hand in hand, just studying people and seeing people’s mannerisms. It’s very interesting, and I like that I can apply something that I worked hard for to what I’m doing right now.”

Cargill’s knowledge, passion, and athletic training are highlighted by her steady discipline in the ring—just look at her encounters with Red Velvet. But, after taking one look at Cargill, it’s immediately clear that her diet and training regimen are no joke, either. While she works out “two hours, five days a week,” she takes care not to starve herself ... and admits to not eating the best

Cargill shows off her agility and physical conditioning during her match at AEW’s first house show on April 9, 2021.



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

at AEW tapings. “I’m getting better, thank God,” she said. Yet, she implements the same in-ring mentality and “work hard” philosophy received from mentors like Mark Henry to maintain her majestic physique.

“It took me about two years to completely understand what I like to eat, as far as healthier food,” she admitted. “It was a lot of trial and error, a lot of money spent. But it’s a lifestyle, and I’ve been stuck in this lifestyle for more years than I haven’t. So, it’s all I know.”

Cargill is also a devoted mother, adjusting to life as a professional wrestler with a four-year-old daughter, Bailey. “Soon as I touch down, I get home, she drops everything. I drop

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



Cargill uses her signature maneuver, dubbed "The Jaded," to put away Reka Tehaka. The move may be one of the most effective finishers in all of AEW.

everything," said Cargill. "She puts up her fist, and she's like, 'Let's wrestle.' She loves it."

AEW's rookie phenom revealed that her daughter's love of wrestling once got her in trouble at school. "Her and this boy were playing tag. And the kid, I guess, kind of pushed her too hard on the tag, and she speared him. And she's four!"

While Bailey could grow up to follow in her proud mom's footsteps, right now, Jade Cargill's got her eye on rising through the ranks of AEW's Women's division. And there are a few particular foes she'd love to get her hands on—including newly crowned champion Dr. Britt Baker.

"Britt's a great wrestler," said Cargill. "She does what needs to be done. I just know that I'm about to shake things up a bit. Britt knows what's coming! We have a minute. I gotta get some wins under my belt. She's been here working for a long time. I have a ways to go. But ... you're just gonna have to see."

In addition to Baker, Cargill is aiming for NWA Women's champ Serena Deeb ("She's so talented. I know I can learn a lot from her. But also, even though she's a sweet being, I'm ready to give it to her") and "The Native Beast" Nyla Rose. "Nyla's a powerhouse. I respect Nyla on all kinds of levels. And I think that would be a powerhouse match. I think that's a pay-per-view match, for sure."

Cargill also had some choice words for Brandi Rhodes. "She got pregnant. I wanted to take it to her, but you know, Red Velvet stepped in her place, which is a great position for her to be in. She filled right in. Perfect opponent. But Brandi, she got it coming. She's a good person, but I don't know. She's a tween-

er, man. She's not good, she's not bad. She's in-between. She knows how to play the game."

Jade Cargill is in a riveting place when it comes to her spot in AEW, as AEW grows as a wrestling promotion. Both are finding and shaping their position in an industry, balancing what's always been with what's yet to come. In Cargill's case, she's thrilled about the future, including being on the road ("I'm excited to see new faces, new fans. Fans that like me, fans that don't like me") and the possibility of doing on-screen work outside of wrestling ("I wouldn't mind if something comes my way. I'm open for opportunity. What I'm very proud of is that I work for a company where Tony Khan allows

us to make money outside of wrestling").

And, powerful as she is by herself, might the Florida native find even more power in numbers? "I think it would be pretty damn cool to have a women's faction over at AEW," she said. "A faction of strong, beautiful women. I think that I haven't really seen that, and that's something that now I'm really interested in digging into."

But, for right now, Jade Cargill is on the hunt to become a top competitor in AEW, while remaining both humble and hungry.

"I'm in love with wrestling," she said. "I'm really focused. I have a lot to learn, and I've got a lot to do right now." ■

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



Brandi Rhodes had some words for Cargill last November. And, though their feud was put on pause due to Rhodes' pregnancy, it's safe to say this rivalry will be settled in the ring at some point.

RICOCHET VS. ALI IS THE MAIN EVENT



... AND THE BEST FEUD YOU
HAVEN'T SEEN ALL YEAR



Buried among *Raw* and *Smackdown* recap packages is the last place most WWE audiences expect breakout performances and solid, in-depth storytelling. Fortunately for fans, and the athletes themselves, *Main Event* offered Ricochet and Mustafa Ali both.

TEXT BY PAUL E. PRATT

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If *Main Event* is secondary programming for WWE, you wouldn't know it from the way Ricochet and Mustafa Ali behaved during their recent rivalry.



"THESE ARE TWO men who have known each other long before their days here in WWE," said Byron Saxton, as Ricochet hurled Mustafa Ali to the ropes during an epic battle on WWE's *Main Event*.

The statement might have rattled some more than Ricochet's Irish whip shook his opponent. Longtime viewers know alluding to a Superstar's past outside the company is a big World Wrestling Entertainment taboo.

In the case of Ricochet and Ali, though, it read like a calculated effort to remind audiences of what once was. Considered undeniable athletes when they first arrived in WWE, both men were far from reaching collective expectations when they opened *Main Event*, in April.

Traditionally a vehicle to bring casual viewers up-to-speed on its "big two" broadcasts, the show has long been considered the WWE equivalent of purgatory. It's the swan song for many, an afterthought for most, and almost *always* where superstars fight for television time while languishing in relative obscurity.

Indeed, things seemed bleak for Ricochet and Ali early this year, as their long and storied history—within and outside WWE—took center stage on the company's least-viewed episodic weekly. Then, something quite remarkable happened: They took full advantage of an opportunity to shine, delivering a thrilling back-and-forth rivalry as "must-see" as any on WWE TV.

With great credit to the announce team, Ali vs. Ricochet slowly but surely assumed a "big fight feel." Over a series of weeks, both delivered performances in and out of the ring (namely a cinematic promo wherein Ricochet received a text message from Ali), confirming



Ricochet vs. Ali was everything wrestling fans could want in a feud—multiple, highly competitive matches, passionate promos, and a satisfying resolution. The fact that it didn't take place on *Raw* is puzzling to many observers.

each deserves significantly more development than either has received.

“Ali has a lot to prove in the wake of Retribution,” Saxton said prior to the April 30 battle between Ricochet and his former teammate.

“I respect the strategy and ideology of Mustafa Ali,” Corey Graves noted. “What he was doing in the past is no longer working, so he’s changing; he’s evolving.”

Assuredly, few had forgotten the catastrophic outcome of what many hoped would be Ali’s *Raw* breakthrough. However, reminding audiences of the misguided stable’s untimely demise only underscored the importance of a win. The broadcasters did not shy away from Ricochet’s desire to rebuild from the ground up, either.

Each man, they noted, *needed* a win ... and, for one, it would come at the expense of the other. The stakes were laid out—and the match did not disappoint.

When Ali scored a tainted victory in their initial bout, and Ricochet immediately demanded and received a rematch, it became clear this was anything but a one-off between old rivals. Throughout May and into June, the former-teammates-turned-enemies traded victories.

During each outing, the feud gained greater significance. After Ali used his feet on the ropes to win the first match, Ricochet used similar tactics in the next. A third match resulted in a double countout, setting the stage for a rubber match on June 1.

In a move not seen often enough in WWE, *Main Event* capitalized on well-documented history between Ricochet and Ali to lay the groundwork for their heated rivalry. It felt real and based on the most primal motives: pride and bragging rights.

“The WWE Universe has widely accepted Ricochet as one of the most exciting, high-flying athletes WWE has ever known,” Graves said, heaping praise on the former NXT North American champion.

“Ali is saying, ‘I’m better than Ricochet! Pay attention!’” he continued, spelling out Ali’s motivation. “Now, he’s prying the eyes of the WWE Universe open and forcing them to watch.”

“It goes deeper than that!” Saxton said at one point. “They started around the same time. They embarked on their sports entertainment careers around the same time, traveled with

the same circles as they made their way to WWE, had a very strong friendship until close to a year ago.”

Naturally, Saxton was referencing pre-COVID WWE programming, when Ricochet, Ali, and Cedric Alexander proved a promising trio on *Raw*. There, the three men weathered seemingly never-ending attacks from more established stars—primarily current WWE champion Bobby Lashley and company.

The up-and-comers stuck together in spite of MVP’s best efforts to drive a wedge between them with invitations to join The Hurt Business. Ali and Ricochet remained tight even after Alexander eventually defected.

Their friendship came to a crashing halt in October 2020, though, when Ali revealed himself as the mysterious mastermind behind Retribution. When Ricochet rejected an offer to join Retribution, Ali led its members one-by-one in destroying his former friend over a number of weeks on WWE television.

Six months later, the ashes of Retribution still smoldering, Ali and Ricochet were at career crossroads. Each looking to put a disappointing 2020 in the rear-view, their rivalry was reborn.

For one man, it would be redemption. That, partnered with incredible in-ring action, gave the rivalry new



During their best-of-three-falls match, Ricochet suplexes Mustafa Ali from atop the guardrail. The former NXT North American champ would take this match two falls to one—proving that, as of right now, he is the superior wrestler.

legs. What might have been a singular event rehashing a months-long story quickly turned into a string of poignant and meaningful contests. For fans, it was a reminder why they love both superstars.

As much as Ali and Ricochet deserved an audience greater than *Main Event* can offer, they would have never received the cumulative hour on-air elsewhere. The best-of-three-falls finale alone clocked over 17 minutes of hotly contested action.

“It truly has felt like a trilogy!” *Main Event*’s Kevin Patrick accurately gushed, as their epic final contest saw Ricochet close the book on the rivalry, two falls to one.

So, for now, their story comes to a close. As both men turn the page on a shared past to begin new chapters in their respective careers, this incredible rivalry on *Main Event* stands as a reminder that the tales they can tell—either together or separately—are immense.

And they’re entirely unwritten. ■

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"NO LIMITS"
for the

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PHOTO COURTESY IMPACT WRESTLING

**JOSH ALEXANDER'S QUEST
TO REDEFINE THE X DIVISION**

After setting the tag team world ablaze as one-half of The North, Alexander found himself back on his own. Now, he's proving that high-impact technical wrestling can be the backbone of a successful weekly TV show.

TEXT BY RIGHTEOUS REG

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING

PWI readers already know Josh Alexander as one-half of The North, who made the top five in our inaugural "Tag Team 50." When his partner, Ethan Page, left for AEW, Alexander tapped into his intensity like never before.

FOR IMPACT WRESTLING'S X division, it's always been about no limits. Whether it be weight limits, style, or match types, the X division has long been one of the premier parts of IMPACT Wrestling.

And, as the current X division champion at press time, Josh Alexander embodies everything the division has represented for years.

"For me, it was a step into the wrestling community and solidifying myself as a singles competitor," he said. "Because all of my success in IMPACT has been in a tag team as a part of The North. When I found out that Ethan was leaving, I was uncomfortable again after two years of having a partner at my side. After 3 months, though, I won the X division championship ... so, I think it's going pretty well."

To go from such a successful tag team, voted the number-four tandem in the world in the *PWI* "Tag Team

50," into the uncharted waters of being a TV singles competitor would be tough for some. But "The

Walking Weapon" got right in the mix with the X division heavy hitters, engaging in great matches with the likes of Rohit Raju, Ace Austin, and Chris Sabin.

Fifteen years into his career, it didn't take much time for Alexander to readjust to being a singles wrestler. When faced with the caliber of wrestlers in the X division—and the unconventional types of matches—he had no choice but to quickly adapt. "Anytime I feel a lot of pressure, or put a lot of pressure on myself, or my back is up against the wall, I always seem to rise to the occasion," said Alexander. "I felt like that in the independents, and I feel like that now in IMPACT Wrestling. It could be OCD, I don't know; but I always overprepare at all times."

The passion that Josh Alexander has comes across anytime he's onscreen. He rocks an old-school amateur wrestling look with singlet and headgear, à la Rick Steiner. And, when the bell rings, he navigates the mat exactly the way you would expect someone with his look to do—suplexes, holds, strikes. Anything to keep his opponent down. Always trying for the victory.

Alexander, like every champion who wears the X division belt, has some pretty big shoes to fill, with a legacy including wrestlers like AJ Styles, Samoa Joe, Christopher Daniels, and Chris Sabin—all of whom held and defended the championship in the formative years of IMPACT Wrestling. Alexander knows the importance the championship holds in the grand scheme of the company. And, with every match, he's trying to build his *own* legacy.

The deceptively strong Alexander connects with a powerslam on Trey Miguel and Dezmond Xavier (NXT's Wes Lee).

PHOTO BY ANDREA KELLAWAY/IMPACT WRESTLING



PHOTO COURTESY IMPACT WRESTLING

Alexander shows off the X division championship belt after winning it at April's Rebellion PPV.

AAW Pro. Alexander would initially injure his neck in a match in AAW. Not wanting to stop the momentum, he opted out of neck surgery and kept wrestling. Monster Mafia was tearing it up all over the country, eventually making its way to California and Pro Wrestling Guerrilla. But, in July 2015, Alexander's neck injury was finally too much, and he had to have surgery that, at the time, was thought to be career-ending.

Through physical therapy and the kind of pure will that he shows between the ropes, Alexander got himself back into ring shape. He also gave back to the business by training the next generation of wrestling talent in Canada—something that Alexander takes a lot of pride in.

At the beginning of his recent singles run, he would visit the independents for a number of high-profile matches with some of the top talents out there. "I want-



PHOTO COURTESY IMPACT WRESTLING

During the triple-threat main event of Rebellion, "The Walking Weapon" nails Ace Austin with a German suplex for a nearfall.

The road to IMPACT and the X division championship was not an easy one for Alexander. At one point, he suffered what he thought was a career-ending neck injury.

In 2013, The North (then known as Monster Mafia) was starting to make waves in the wrestling industry for companies like Ring of Honor and Chicago's



PHOTO COURTESY IMPACT WRESTLING

Alexander clobbers TJP, whom he considers one of his best opponents ever.

ed to see how I stacked up against the younger talent while helping them," he told *PWI*. "There's clearly a 10- to 12-year age difference between me and a lot of those guys, so I wanted to see how this new generation does things. Lee Moriarty, Rob Garcia, Kevin Blackwood—all these guys are so skilled and wise beyond their years. I hope to continue to do independent matches, because I still learn a lot in there."

Alexander is imparting that veteran knowledge while applying everything he's learned into being the best X division champ he can. So far, he's been having the time of his life taking on all challengers, with one challenger being arguably his best to date. "I had some great match-

Neck issues once put Alexander's career in jeopardy, but surgery, physical therapy, and impeccable conditioning have helped him remain resilient. Here, he shakes off a kick from Pro Wrestling NOAH star Naomichi Marufuji.

PHOTO BY ANDREA KELLAWAY/IMPACT WRESTLING



match, I knew I was going to get my money's worth," he recalled. "When I tuned into a wrestling program as a fan, I wanted to see badass wrestling. I wanted to see that match that was going to do everything to steal the show. That's what the X division is. That's what 'no limits' means to me. Doesn't mean a triple-moonsault. If it's one thing I've stubbornly done my entire career, it was to do *the* most I can to try to steal the show."

Alexander is keeping with the legacy of athletes like Amazing Red, Low Ki, and Jerry Lynn. With every match, he's establishing what his version of the X division is. The best X division wrestlers of all-time were fighting champions, defending the belt in Ultimate X matches and other

es with Ace Austin and eventually hope to lock up with Chris Bey, as I think he's a shining star of the future," he said. "But, far and away, my best opponent, maybe ever, has been TJP. We have had three matches, and all of them have been completely different and the most competitive matches I've ever had. We have this chemistry together that would make you think of Shawn [Michaels] and Bret [Hart], or Dean [Malenko] and Eddie [Guerrero]. I think it's one of those matches that just works."

Not long after it was taped, rumors swirled that the Iron Man match between Alexander and TJP (air date: June 3) was one of the great-

multi-man showcases. Alexander is here for the fight and the challenge.

Will we remember "The Walking Weapon's" name in history alongside those who paved the way? Where does he land in the budding IMPACT vs. AEW interpromotional war? For his part, Alexander believes he stacks up well against the current IMPACT and AEW World champion, Kenny Omega, and would be up for any challenge presented.

Beyond that, Josh Alexander proudly represents his native Canada and hopes to keep shining a light on wrestlers above the border. A run as one of the premier champions in the business would be a great way to start. ■

"The Walking Weapon" wrenches down on an ankle lock during his January match against Brian Myers. Wherever he is on the card, Alexander always aims to steal the show with his intensity and raw, technical ability.

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



est matches in the history of IMPACT Wrestling. And the bout was one to remember—giving fans of IMPACT more of Alexander to sink their teeth into.

"Back in the day, when I saw that 'X' graphic flash before a match, signaling that it was an X division

THE Super 8 TURNS 25

**Canceled Flights &
Broken Bones Can't
Defeat Indie
Wrestling's Top
Tournament!**

TEXT BY BRADY HICKS • PHOTOS BY JEFF SCHEERER



Since its 1997 inception, ECWA's Super 8 has shaped the careers of many—from Christopher Daniels and Daniel Bryan to Xavier Woods and Tommaso Ciampa—and, despite hitting a few potholes, this year's edition continued down that same hallowed path.



UNORTHODOX. BY ITS definition, the term refers to something that is “different, unusual, or deviates from tradition.” The East Coast Wrestling Association's 25th annual Super 8 tournament—a show usually defined by tradition—was completely unorthodox.

Global pandemic and reduced ticket sales aside, this year's tourney in Morganville, NJ, featured devastating injuries, shocking upsets, a new breed of middle-aged stars, and the most unlikely of winners.

Still, since its 1997 inception, Super 8 has provided a platform for independent wrestlers to emerge. And, in that respect, the show was as traditional as ever.

French Interruption

At 55, Mr. Ooh La La has long been a regional favorite on the independent scene, having delighted fans with his lighthearted approach to in-ring competition over the last 30+ years. Despite his overwhelming popularity, the fiery Frenchman never seemed destined to capture heavyweight gold. For almost a decade, he's frequently struggled to enter the ring without tripping onto his face.

On this night, Ooh La La landed in a different way, delivering a devastating stunner to ECWA champion Joey Ace, knocking the wind out of him just long enough to get a three-count in their non-tournament match. For the “Five-Star Stud,” the loss was a devastating setback, as he had already forged his reputation winning the same belt at the 2019 and 2020 Super 8 cards.

Losing the title left Ace reeling. As he later tried to explain, “It was a fluke. I was OOH LA ROBBED.”

Backstage official Joe Zanolle did not see it that way. “Mr. Ooh La La is Mr. ECWA,” he



THE 2021 SUPER 8 ENTRANTS

TOP ROW: Mike Law, Timmy Lou Retton, Matt Makowski, Alex Anthony
BOTTOM ROW: Killian McMurphy (w/ Big Dust), Bam Sullivan, Devon Storm, A Very Good Professional Wrestler

said. “To finally see him win the big one was a dream for the ECWA faithful. Truly a historic win.”

“Honestly, I'm tired. I feel like I've been hit by a car,” said Ooh La La, bracing himself against a wall and wincing. “But what I really felt was honored. Despite my age and lack of technical ability, I'm honored that ECWA management thought enough to put me in a position to win.”

Card Subject To Change

Obviously, putting together a tournament of Super 8's magnitude and significance can be a logistical nightmare. Conflicts, injuries, and even random flight changes can permanently alter the face of even the best-planned cards.

They can also provide new opportunities. For Devon "Crowbar" Storm, Ricky Morton's day-of canceled flight gave him the chance to enter the tournament's field as a walk-in at 47 years old.

Storm—a WCW, ECW, and ECWA alum—competed in and fell short of winning the first three installments of Super 8. For him, the possibility of entering the field one more time was an appealing one that he could not pass up, even if he was left with little time to prepare.

"Three hours notice. That's what I was given," he said. "Thank you, Ricky Morton. With my cardiovascular training, I am beating guys 20 years my younger. I am timeless."

Surprisingly, the 30-year veteran kept pace with former ECWA champ "Colossal" Mike Law, overpowering him in a physical, opening-round encounter, before losing to eventual winner Killian McMurphy. This semi-final match saw McMurphy benefiting from the interference of his manager, Dustin "Big Dust" Wilson.

While it was a disappointing result, the showing gave vindication to Storm, who believes he should be considered in the same light as other Super 8 legends before him, despite his age.



Devon Storm, who'd previously competed in multiple Super 8 tournaments, was tapped as a last-minute replacement for Ricky Morton.

Tough Break

A Very Good Professional Wrestler seemed to be on the cusp of achieving a second-straight tournament victory, with big wins over talented aerialist Alex Anthony and submission specialist Matt Makowski already logged. But the heavy favorite faced the promising up-and-comer Killian McMurphy as his final obstacle to matching what only Christopher Daniels (2000 and 2004) and Deonna Purrazzo (2015 and 2016, Women's Super 8) had done in the past.

Unfortunately, as Allen Saunders once said, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

In the snap of an ankle, it was all taken away. As fans silently looked on in horror, AVGPW flipped over and landed on the side of his foot, fracturing it in three places and rendering him incapable of even standing, let alone finishing his third match. The former Dasher Hatfield could now do nothing but lie slumped on the Jersey Dugout floor. He lay vulnerable and curled over in pain, just feet from the ring apron where he'd awkwardly landed mere moments before.

For a man who usually thrives on being in control, the celebrated technical wrestler could do nothing but look on as official John Finegan was forced to stop the match and award the historic Super 8 trophy to Killian McMurphy.

While A Very Good Professional Wrestler was not immediately available for comment, Zanolle said of the injury: "Disappointing. In 25 years, that was a first, having to stop the main event for an injury. Like they say, 'this isn't ballet.'"



In non-tournament action, indie journeyman Mr. Ooh La La upsets Joey Ace to become ECWA heavyweight champion.



Last year's winner, A Very Good Professional Wrestler, was heavily favored to take home the Super 8 trophy again in 2021. Unfortunately for him, fate had other plans.

That's A Shoot(er)

Heading into the '21 Super 8, only one man predicted the "Shamrock Shooter" Killian McMurphy—a fifth-year wrestler out of Kansas (by way of Delaware)—would take the trophy home.

"Of course I won, doofus. I knew I would," said McMurphy when pressed for comment. "I'm just glad everyone else woke up."

"The Shamrock Shooter" showed tremendous resolve, earning difficult wins against stronger, bigger men, Bam Sullivan and Devon Storm, prior to his showdown with presumptive favorite, A Very Good Professional Wrestler. Tension remained thick through pre-match introductions, as both men glared at one another. McMurphy used his ECWA Legacy title belt to taunt his opponent, while AVGPW had the sound technician replay the refrain from his theme, Foo Fighters' "Best Of You," ad nauseam ("The best/the best/the best").

Despite seeming overmatched early, McMurphy resolved not to make a costly mistake. And, when the 2020 Super 8 champion crashed hard, he and Big Dust looked as surprised as anyone by the startling conclusion and quick trophy coronation.

Reactions from those at ringside mirrored this disbelief. "I was shocked," noted Robert Todd Kennedy, an ECWA fan since 1983. "Pro Wrestler was my pick all the way. It was a solid field, and Killian McMurphy had a great night, but I had AVGPW going back-to-back from the moment I heard he was in it."



AVGPW is helped to the back after suffering a truly brutal leg injury, leaving Killian McMurphy to win this year's tournament by forfeit.

Joe Zanolle saw things differently. "This year was just Killian's year," he said. "He has 'it' and had an excellent chance of winning, even if A Very Good Professional Wrestler had not broken his ankle. Super 8 is very competitive. Really, any of the eight could have won the whole thing."

All told, the 2021 event had a truly unique feel. There were no heartfelt speeches. No congratulatory handshakes. Only chaos and drama as ECWA staff carried the fallen mat technician to the back.

Killian McMurphy, meanwhile, stood in the center of the ring, celebrating by himself and crowing to the crowd—rather than basking in humility and thanking others, as so many past winners had over the years.

Super 8 is so unique in the opportunities it gives stars to emerge. And, on this unusual night, with the "Shamrock Shooter" holding the trophy high, this year's tournament kept that tradition alive. ■

"The Shamrock Shooter" poses with the coveted Super 8 trophy. Though many fans were understandably upset to see the brash ECWA Legacy champ win the tournament, there's no denying McMurphy has a tremendous future in professional wrestling.



PUNCHING UP

WITH JORDYNNE GRACE

WE ARE ALL aware of the general consensus that humans don't deserve animals, but that will never stop us from trying to earn them! Over half the world's population has a furry (or not so furry) companion in their lives, and wrestlers are no different. Our fur babies keep us grounded, give us a responsibility beyond ourselves, and allow us to be loved and give love unconditionally.

But how do wrestlers manage their travel schedules while giving their pets all the love and affection they need? I asked a few of my colleagues, and this is what they had to say.

ECW legend and current IMPACT star, Tommy Dreamer, has three hardcore canine sons, Jake (7), Kalani (1), and Timer (5). He told me, "Your pets are your kids. I always make sure someone is home to take care of them when I'm not. The rare occasions I can't find someone, I take them all with me."

Deonna Purrazzo, the current IMPACT Knockouts champion, adopted Fitzgerald when he was eight weeks old, and he's just celebrated his second birthday. "Being a dog mom and wrestler is hard, but I have a great group of friends, all with dogs themselves, who are willing to help each other," she said. "We also found a great puppy hotel where Fitz can sleep in the same room with his sister, Honey, and they get to play

all day long. I always miss them, but I know they are getting the best care possible while I work to buy them all the toys and treats!"

Being in the locker room with Deonna every month, I can attest to her being an awesome dog mom. She's constantly getting updates about Fitz from his nanny, and they send daily photos to show that he's happy and healthy. We frequently exchange stories about our dogs and their crazy

tendencies in between planning matches, filming segments for television, and eating catering! Our pets are always on our minds.

AEW star Kris Statlander has the perfect pet to fit her unique wrestling persona—a bearded dragon! Her reptilian son is named Balder, though she sometimes calls him "Boots." She also has an adorable Shiba Inu named Dino, whom you can see more of on her Instagram. Balder is about 8-9 months old, and Kris has had him for about three months. She says she balances wrestling life and pet mom life by "being very stressed about him (Balder) and the dog, because they're your babies. But we also have a lot of friends that are willing to feed him bugs and hang out with him."

LuFisto, a wrestling veteran I previously featured in "Punching Up!," has four of the most adorable cats you'll probably ever see. Billy Bob, a 14-year-old tuxedo;



A Christmas photoshoot with indie favorite EFFY, his boyfriend, and their dog Cranberry—a former stray who loves to hunt lizards. (Better keep her away from Balder Statlander!)

PHOTO BY PETER KOSLOWSKY



How photogenic is Dude, the Bernedoodle? Though she misses him when she travels, Chelsea Green is always glad to see Dude when she gets home.

Monsieur Chu Lee, a 12-year-old seal point Siamese; Slash, a two-year-old beige Persian; and Axelle, a two-year-old Persian Tortie. I personally have never met someone who knew all of their distinctive cat breeds. And, if you asked me mine, I would say, “orange.” When LuFisto hits the road, she says her cats’ have the “greatest grandma. When I have to leave for wrestling, she comes home to feed them, make sure they are okay, plays with them ... they are spoiled!”

EFFY, an independent wrestling legend in his own right, has Cranberry, whom he and his boyfriend found in an abandoned parking lot as a puppy. “My boyfriend convinced me to sneak a dog into our non-dog-friendly apartment,” he told me. “Once she settled, she decided she was home, and that was that.”

An avid lizard hunter (and apparent telepath), Cranberry seems to have named herself. “Through previous experiences with otherworldly, brain-altering self-trials, I can speak

to some animals,” EFFY explained. “Cranberry is a very deliberate communicator. You can ask her yes or no questions and always get an answer.” Simply incredible.

Chelsea Green, a former WWE/IMPACT superstar and recent free agent, has a one-year-old Bernedoodle puppy. Although, if you look at him, you would never guess he’s just a baby! Perfectly named, “Dude” sleeps about 20 hours a day. “I find, as I get older, it’s becoming harder to leave my animals,” Chelsea admitted. “I’ve got three cats and a puppy, so it’s four sets of eyes watching me wheel my suitcase out the door. We are so lucky that all four animals are so well-behaved and have adapted to our life on the go!”

I was also delighted to have the opportunity to ask Natalya, WWE superstar and the BOAT [“Best Of All-Time”–KM], about her pet mom life. She has five cats and loves them all dearly, but 2Pawz is the celebrity of the group, gaining immense popularity via Natalya’s

social media. 2Pawz has an impressive 156K Instagram followers.

“I love having cats because they always make me feel at home,” said Natalya. “Cats are very temperamental, and I also kind of like that, too. They remind me that you have to work for it. They’re not as easy to gain your trust, love, or affection as dogs are.”

The only drawback to having cats, Natalya told me, is when she goes on the road. “They pee on my wrestling gear to let me know they’re mad I left in the first place!”

Fair play, cats!

Cats, dogs, and bearded dragons alike, wrestlers adore their pets, leaning on them for strength in times of uncertainty and basking in the love they give without reprieve. Having two cats and two dogs myself, I know how difficult it is to leave for days, weeks, or even months at a time. But, no matter what, we know when we walk back through those doors, our pets will act like we never left at all. They’re the true definition of “home.” □

RIGHTEOUS WRAP UP

BY RIGHTEOUS REG

JEROME YOUNG, AKA New Jack, is quite possibly the most controversial pro wrestler of all-time. Throughout his 29-year career, until his recent untimely death, he was one of the most feared opponents in wrestling. From day one, New Jack was unapologetically himself, never once conforming to be what someone else wanted him to be. He was unpredictable, mysterious—fans never knew what to expect, as, at any moment, things could always take a turn for the worse. With that, New Jack left a legacy of carnage and violence all around the world. Until the end of his run, he made sure that anytime he was on a show, his match would be unforgettable ... some a little *too* unforgettable.

New Jack was the child of a traumatizing home. Losing both of his parents early and experiencing pain that he would hold onto his entire life, it was a constant climb for him. Time spent in and out of jail led him to become a bounty hunter, where he would add even more trauma to the already exhausting life he'd been leading.

In 1992, New Jack finally got into pro wrestling, training under Ray Candy. He pretty quickly got into the mix with some well-known Southern promotions like the USWA. In 1994, he met his tag partner Mustafa Saed; they would form the tag team The

Gangstas. The two men started making noise and gaining recognition when they debuted for Jim Cornette's Smoky Mountain Wrestling in 1994, where the legacy of New Jack would begin through multiple controversial interviews and angles.

Anyone who knew him knows that no matter what New Jack was doing, he never would hold back. And you would see that as soon as he would grab a microphone. Coming up as a Black wrestler in the Southern U.S. is always a very difficult journey. In Smoky Mountain, Cornette would capitalize on that with The Gangstas. Oftentimes, Jack would use not even racial undertones but racial *overtones* in his promos to really get the crowd riled up. Who knew that what he did in SMW would be tame compared to what was to come?

In 1995, New Jack and Mustafa Saed would join the company where they enjoyed their greatest prominence—and really cemented a legacy—in Extreme Championship Wrestling. The Gangstas were immediately



New Jack & Mustafa Saed (The Gangstas) pose with their security guard, D'Lo Brown. In SMW, New Jack's edgy, yet unforgettable promos helped make the team a top heel act. But those early controversies seem downright quaint compared to his later antics.



Fans watch in both amusement and horror as New Jack brutalizes ECW rival Angel with a fork. Over the years, it became ever more difficult to tell which parts of a New Jack match were scripted and which were utter chaos.

contenders for the ECW tag team championship, battling with teams like Public Enemy, The Pitbulls, and The Eliminators en route to winning the ECW tag team championship—the only high-profile championship Jack ever won (or even cared to win) in his career.

It was in ECW where Jack developed his signature style. Every time New Jack hit the ring, you knew he was coming, because the song “Natural Born Killaz” by Ice Cube and Dr. Dre hit the house speakers and wouldn’t stop until the three was counted for the end of the match. New Jack was the only wrestler ever to have his entrance music play throughout the entire match on a regular basis.

When Jack hit the curtain, a hip-hop legend—could be 2Pac or Master P—usually was on his shirt. And he’d always bring a trash can full of weapons to the ring. Whatever was in that can would help him have the most violent match of the show: cookie sheets, vacuum cleaners, golf clubs, a guitar ... anything Jack could find on his way to the ring to inflict punishment onto his opponent.

Another signature of New Jack’s, which he developed in ECW, was brawling into the crowd. He’d set up his opponent on a table and jump from the highest point he could reach in a venue. Jack did some of the most insane dives of all-time, risking life and limb in every single match.

While New Jack for sure ruffled some feathers with the racially driven promos he did in Smoky Mountain, the real-life consequences began while in ECW. In 1996, a 17-year old kid, dubbed “Mass Transit,” fooled those in charge of ECW into believing he was an adult professional wrestler, and that he could have a match with The Gangstas.

During the match, New Jack used a blade to open up the young man’s forehead. While the spot had been previously agreed upon by both parties, New Jack accidentally cut too deep, leading to a disturbing amount of blood and the match being stopped. The incident led to legal action against ECW, as well as the cancelation of the company’s first-ever scheduled pay-per-view.

New Jack would continue to impart his violent style throughout his ECW career, including an incident with Vic Grimes that ended with Grimes landing on him from about 30 feet in the air. Jack got his revenge many years later in XPW, where he threw Grimes from a scaffold into the ring (a spot that almost spelled disaster for Grimes).

But these weren’t the only times New Jack ran into some trouble with a match. On multiple occasions, he was accused of taking liberties with opponents, including with weapons. In 2004, he faced felony charges after stabbing wrestler William Jason Lane multiple times with a shiv during a match. Until the end of his career, we never really knew which of New Jack’s matches were on the up-and-up or which of his opponents were truly willing participants.

Beyond all the controversy and unscripted violent moments, New Jack had a long and fulfilling career, which spanned almost three decades. He spent some time in TNA, memorably teaming with Shark Boy. For obvious reasons, he never got a run up top in WWE. But, in all actuality, I never felt like that’s something that he wanted to do. The company would have changed all the most exciting things about him.

Jack had the chance to tell his story multiple times in shoot interviews throughout the years, and was showcased on season two of Vice’s *Dark Side of the Ring*. Now, through YouTube, new generations of fans get to learn about the one of the greatest Black wrestling characters of all-time. (He’s definitely entertained me ever since the moment I first witnessed the carnage back in 1998.) Controversies aside, Jerome Young will truly be missed in the world of pro wrestling, and there will never be another like New Jack. □

THE W COLUMN

BY KRISTEN ASHLY

WHEN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLER and mixed martial artist Thunder Rosa arrived at AEW last September, competing for the AEW Women's World championship and defending her NWA World Women's championship, the all-rounder shook up the women's wrestling scene with her cross-over appeal, pure skill, and must-see matches.

However, Thunder Rosa's *real* work toward a better future for women's wrestling started three months prior, following the announcement of the formation of an all-women's wrestling promotion: Mission Pro Wrestling.

Founded by Thunder Rosa's husband Brian Cervantes and his friend, Mission Pro was created first as an intergender promotion out of Buda, Texas, in 2019. MPW held its first event in October of that year. A few short months later, COVID put a halt to indie shows, but it was the #SpeakingOut movement in June 2020 that really redirected Mission Pro's vision. Cervantes knew something had to be done to create a safe space for wrestlers, leading Mission Pro to be rechristened as an all-women's promotion.

"My husband was like, 'Dude, I think we need to do something,'"

Thunder Rosa recalled. "And every time he says something like that, I know he's going to put me to work. So, we started contacting people and we started getting a lot of traction, which I honestly was not expecting. We decided to have our first show, and I knew that, with COVID and everything, was going to be hard. But, in Texas, things were kind of loose."

Mission Pro Wrestling's first all-women show, *Hell Hath No Fury*, happened almost a full year after MPW's debut event, taking place in September 2020—the same month Thunder Rosa rejuvenated the NWA and AEW women's rosters. Not long after her first AEW appearance, and the fresh start of Mission Pro, there was a sudden surge of indie women's wrestlers seemingly everywhere one looked.

Female wrestlers in the independent scene not only appeared on an increasing number of indie pay-per-views, but also on the return of *NWA Powerrr*, AEW's YouTube shows *Dark* and *Dark: Elevation*, and even on cable, via *AEW Dynamite*. Often, these were the same



PHOTO BY BRYANT MOONEY

Aided by a chair, Jennacide locks a brutal crossface on the veteran Holidead. Rising stars like Jennacide have benefited greatly from competing for Mission Pro Wrestling, with much of the roster appearing on weekly programs like *NWA Powerrr* and *AEW Dark*.



Last December, Lacey Ryan faced La Rosa Negra in the finals of a tourney to crown the inaugural Mission Pro champion. Today, Ryan is better known to mainstream audiences as NXT's Zoey Stark.

women who competed in the ring during Mission Pro's pay-per-views—suggesting Thunder Rosa might have a helping hand in providing opportunities for the women who compete for her promotion.

“For some of them, we direct them to AEW or NWA,” the former World Women's champ admitted. “And a lot of our footage is being watched by people in that business. I can tell you that.”

Does this mean that Mission Pro helps promote and book women for other promotions? Thunder Rosa credited most of her roster's success to their professionalism and cohesiveness, rather than getting a bump from “La Mera Mera” herself. The six-year veteran revealed Mission Pro is very particular about which women they decide to book and develop: professionals desirable by any promotion, televised or not.

“We definitely have a very particular way to hire some of our talent,” she said. “Mission Pro is all about empowering each other and building a real sisterhood. I think that was one of the things that I felt I didn't have when I was brought up in the business six,

seven years ago, until I went to Japan. Those women that were with me at that time, they really showed me what taking care of each other really meant. And that's all about no attitudes; the attitudes are thrown out the door, even if you have a big name. We really look for people that are down to earth, that are there to help and empower other women. Because not everybody's at the same level.”

The decision to develop talent this way has certainly paid off for many female wrestlers. Since the rebranding of Mission Pro roughly a year ago, the promotion has held events featuring almost 20 female wrestlers who were unsigned when first appearing for the company, but have since appeared for and/or signed with NWA, AEW, and even WWE.

Three MPW alumni have made the jump to WWE, including Lacey Ryan (Zoey Stark), who competed in a tournament to crown the first MPW Champion. (She lost in the final to La Rosa Negra.)

NWA *Powerrr* has benefited from talent developed at Mission Pro, including Florida native Jennacide. Earlier this year, Jennacide memorably

faced NWA regular Kamille in a singles match. Additionally, she's also battled Skye Blue and Alex Gracia—two wrestlers who regularly compete for Mission Pro.

As for AEW? All three of its weekly shows consistently feature women who've competed before Mission Pro fans, including Kenzie Paige, Ray Lyn, Tesha Price, Vertvixen, and Jazmin Allure.

But Mission Pro's vision goes further than simply giving opportunities inside the ring. The founders aim to provide professional development for women who are interested in other aspects of the business, and to pave the way for women in the U.S. to make a mark around the globe.

“We want to use the network that we already have with so many promotions all over the world, once everything opens, and really create opportunities and raise money to send people to Japan,” Thunder Rosa revealed, adding that such opportunities will really help MPW wrestlers grow. “I always feel, overall, [wrestlers] need to be open-minded on everything in order to be successful. I think that was one of the reasons why me as a wrestler, or as a wrestling persona, has been so successful, because I don't stick to one category only.”

Mission Pro Wrestling is changing women's wrestling, both on our television screens and behind the scenes. From raising funds for non-profit organizations to raising the profile of up-and-coming wrestlers, the promotion is certainly making an impact.

How can fans support their efforts? By watching women's wrestling on television, PPV, and streaming platforms. For those interested (and not local to Texas), Mission Pro Wrestling events can be viewed on the Title Match Wrestling Network streaming service. □

TV BREAKDOWN

BY HARRY BURKETT

FOCUS ON... WWE SMACKDOWN

SMACKDOWN VIEWER NUMBERS [FOX]

April 23: 2,119,000
April 30: 2,018,000
May 7: 2,282,000
May 14: 1,917,000
May 21: 1,933,000
May 28: 1,830,000

Analysis: First-run episodes of CBS' *Blue Bloods* usually win Friday nights, so *Smackdown's* real rival has been ABC's *Shark Tank* in recent weeks. Consider May 21: *Shark Tank's* season finale beat *Smackdown* in overall viewer numbers, but the blue brand still tied for the 18- to 49-year-old demo. Is there any shame in losing to a 55-year-old episode of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*? Hopefully not, because a colorized double-shot of *DVD* on CBS beat *Smackdown* in overall viewers during that night's 8 p.m. hour. The next week, a Brooklyn Nets-Boston Celtics NBA playoff game on ABC was victorious, edging out *Smackdown* in overall viewers and the 18-to-49 demo. *Smackdown* doesn't dominate, but it helps Fox remain solidly in the mix.

AEW PREPARES FOR A TRIP ...

Before there was *WCW Monday Nitro* on TNT, there was *NWA World Championship Wrestling* on WTBS. AEW hopes to recreate the excitement of Jim Crockett Promotions' flagship program, when Dusty Rhodes captivated millions and the Four Horsemen ran roughshod. AEW is reaching back to modern wrestling's roots, heading to TBS.

Look out, Billy Corgan: AEW plans to exploit the 6:05 vibe.

AEW President Tony Khan didn't have much choice in the matter, as Turner Entertainment scored a seven-year agreement with the National Hockey League to air regular-season games, as well as Stanley Cup playoff and finals games on TNT and TBS

starting this fall. It only made sense to move AEW programming to TBS.

In an interview with the *New York Post*, Brett Weitz—the general manager of TNT, TBS, and truTV—acknowledged this was a factor in moving *AEW Dynamite* to TBS in January 2022.

“Did the NHL have anything to do with it? Sure,” responded Weitz. “NBA had something to do with it, the COVID schedule, the tons of preemptions. When we looked at where the consumer’s gonna be, where wrestling fans were going to be, we want to give them the most opportunity to consume as many shows as possible. We felt TBS had an opportunity to be the network and the best platform for expansion.”

... BACK TO THE MOTHERSHIP!

Cody Rhodes added a bit more color to Mr. Weitz' WarnerMedia press-release lingo, speaking like a wrestling fan mindful of TBS' rich wrestling heritage.

“Tony Schiavone texted me that morning, and of course he said, ‘We’re going back to the mothership,’” Rhodes told *ComicBook.com*. “And the mothership is what my father used to call TBS, for good reason, because they took that first chance on WCW and Jim Crockett Promotions.”



Miro retains the TNT championship against Dante Martin on the April 28 episode of *Friday Night Dynamite*. Despite AEW's planned move to TBS, it's looking unlikely the name of its secondary singles title will change anytime soon.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

Dusty did often refer to WTBS as “the mothership” on the air, even after *World Championship Wrestling* had evolved into *WCW Saturday Night*.

AEW’s *Rampage* will dust off the Friday-night time slot once occupied by the *WCW Power Hour*, which featured incredible bouts—from Arn Anderson vs. The Great Muta, to Steve Austin and Brian Pillman vs. Shane Douglas and Ricky Steamboat—during its early-1990s run.

Rampage will make its TNT premiere at 10 p.m. Eastern on Friday, August 13, and will move to TBS in January. Tony Khan insists it will not be a secondary program, but will feature its own wrestlers and storylines while sharing the same championships as *Dynamite*. In a surprise announcement at Double or Nothing, Tony Schiavone intro-

duced WWE Hall-of-Famer Mark Henry as the future co-host of *Rampage*, adding that Henry will also serve as a coach to younger talent.

There will also be four supercard specials with a *Clash of the Champions* or *Saturday Night’s Main Event* feel, airing on TNT to maintain the cross-promotion of both Turner brands.

So, the big question is this: Does the TNT championship become the “TBS” title?

“I don’t think we’re going to change the title’s name one bit,” said Rhodes. “TNT is the place that the first alternative challenger brand appeared on ... I’m 99-percent sure the TNT title stays the TNT title.”

WHO GOT THE RAW DEAL?

Mixed martial arts color analyst Jimmy Smith debuted as the new play-by-play announcer for *Mon-*

day Night Raw on May 31, ending Adnan Virk’s short-lived run at the center of the industry’s most important three-person announce desk. Virk, while coming across as a consummate professional, didn’t seem to have the spark necessary to boost ratings for *Raw*—the third hour of which has plummeted to record lows as of late.

WWE’s play-by-play veteran Michael Cole highly recommended Virk for the role, but social-media criticism began almost immediately when fans realized he didn’t have any credible wrestling experience, either as an announcer or a fan.

Smith, for his part, has referred to being a fan of “Mr. Perfect” Curt Hennig and Bruiser Brody, apparently admitting that he hadn’t watched WWE in decades. Yet Smith, a former MMA fighter, has been highly praised for his announce work for Bellator, UFC, NBC’s *American Ninja Warrior*, and *Premier Boxing Champions*. He will continue to host SiriusXM’s *Unlocking the Cage* on weekday afternoons.

Vince McMahon’s desire to bring MMA credibility to the announce table dates back to WWE’s negotiations with Mike Goldberg in 2005.

Meanwhile, former *Raw* host Tom Phillips couldn’t even hold on to his gig as announcer for 205 Live. Yikes!

MLW ON VICE

Major League Wrestling didn’t get the lead-in time slot for Vice’s popular *Dark Side Of The Ring*, but it did nab the noon time slot on Saturdays. MLW is currently airing “best of” matches to familiarize its new audience, and is planning a set of television tapings for Saturday, July 10, at the 2300 Arena in Philadelphia.

Depending on its Saturday ratings, *MLW On Vice* could move to Thursday prime-time at some point. *MLW Fusion* will continue to be posted on YouTube. □

SPOTLIGHT MATCH KARRION KROSS vs. FINN BALOR – WWE NXT, MAY 25

Wade Barrett called it the biggest rematch in *NXT* history. And he was probably right, if he was referring to *NXT*’s Ucable TV era. Despite being the new *NXT* champion, Karrion Kross still had something to prove, attempting to match Balor hold for hold, but still resorting to his “no-sell” stance or power moves when necessary. Kross executed a lariat at just the right time, mixed in some forearms and stomps, before clamping on his Kross Jacket sleeper for the win.



SMOOTH'S COURT

— A GLOBAL WRESTLING EXPERIENCE

BY WALTER YEATES

WELCOME TO THE first edition of “Smooth’s Court: A Global Wrestling Experience,” a continuation of a column those familiar with my work have seen several places on the internet. It is great to bring the column to *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, where I can offer insight into what is going on around the wrestling world. “Smooth’s Court” will provide a look at the global wrestling scene, dive deeper into my interviews, and give hints about several things I’m currently working on related to wrestling journalism.

To begin, rumors of conversations surrounding a possible New Japan Pro-Wrestling and World Wrestling Entertainment partnership began stirring recently, without much to the report other than a talk was had around March. At face value, the rumor seems highly unlikely to happen, as it would require NJPW to work exclusively with WWE in the United States. NJPW recently extended its global partnership, which is commonly known as the “IWGP Conception,” in recent months, as it is now working with IMPACT Wrestling and All Elite Wrestling. NJPW also has a long working relationship with Ring of Honor. This means the company would have to end each of those arrangements—even though IMPACT is now a Canadian company—in order to work with WWE.

While I do not have an official word at the writing of this column, it doesn’t seem a likely scenario, given the consistent public relations issues following WWE. Also, the depth of New Japan’s current relationships, including Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre (CMLL) in Mexico and Revolution Pro Wrestling (RevPro) in the United Kingdom, gives NJPW numerous growth opportunities, along with a supply of wrestlers to potentially work with. It would be out-of-character behavior for NJPW to forgo those relationships, especially months after beginning

new collaborations with AEW and IMPACT Wrestling.

More NJPW news ... IWGP World heavyweight champion **Will Ospreay**, of the **United Empire** faction, had to vacate the championship due to a litany of injury concerns related to his neck and back. He hopes to return to action this year, but his timetable remains up in the air. After Ospreay’s successful V1 defense against **Los Ingobernables de Japon** member, **Shingo Takagi**, NJPW had to cancel several events due to COVID-19 issues. The company was forced to reschedule



Shingo Takagi eliminates Rhett Titus from the 2019 Honor Rumble at MSG. An exclusive relationship between WWE and NJPW would preclude New Japan from other fruitful partnerships, like the one they’ve enjoyed with Ring of Honor.

PHOTO BY BRUNO SILVEIRA/RING OF HONOR



Andrade celebrates a victory at the 2020 Elimination Chamber event in Philly (his last time competing before a live WWE crowd). “El Idolo” was set to challenge Kenny Omega for the AAA Mega title at Triplemania 29.

two large dome events from its planned Wrestling Grand Slam tour.

New STRONG openweight champion (and **Team Filthy** leader), “**Filthy**” **Tom Lawlor**, will have made his V1 defense of the championship by press time, against former Team Filthy member, “**Dirty Daddy**” **Chris Dickinson**. The match between the two is the first-ever defense of the recently minted title belt.

In Mexico, CMLL has once again begun allowing fans into venues, as they are selling tickets to all upcoming events at Arena Mexico—a result of the improving COVID-19 situation around Mexico City. CMLL’s business model is even more centralized around ticket sales than NJPW, which has begun modernizing its business model to reflect a more digital age over the past several years. While CMLL is guarded regarding its ticket numbers and overall revenue, the return of fans will certainly provide a boon for wrestlers and office members.

CMLL is traditional regarding how it conducts business, to the point where it surprised many by ending its working relationship

with fellow IWGP Conception member ROH earlier this year—for reasons that are not obvious, even to keen observers. ROH provided CMLL some exposure in the United States. While the relationship was not as fruitful for talent as its NJPW partnership, it did provide value. The aftermath of COVID-19 could see CMLL change the way it does business, as the company offered more PPV programming in lieu of ticketed events. But it seems unlikely, given the track record of those in charge of the company.

In other news from Mexico, the historic North American wrestling powerhouse with a rich lucha culture ... “**El Idolo**” **Andrade**, who was granted his release from WWE earlier in the year, issued a challenge to Lucha Libre AAA Mega champion **Kenny Omega**, which has been booked for Triplemania 29. This is a high-profile bout during AAA’s largest event of the year. While the company has understandably lost momentum due to COVID-19, this contest will bring attention from all over North America to Triplemania.

RevPro held Epic Encounter 11 on May 16, an event headlined

by **Dan Moloney** defeating **Mad Kurt** by referee’s decision at the 10:32 mark. The event also featured **Ricky Knight Jr.** defeating **JJ Gale** in 11:35. RevPro Undisputed British Women’s champion **Jamie Hayter** lost to challenger **Skye Smitson** by disqualification in 4:05. By RevPro rules, Hayter was able to retain her championship.

On May 5, World Wonder Ring Stardom held an event that saw **STARS** members **Mayu Iwatani** and **Starlight Kid** become number-one contenders to the Goddess

of Stardom championship after winning a four-team match. They unsuccessfully challenged for the title on May 15 against current champions, **Donna del Mondo** members **Giulia & Syuri**. Giulia and Syuri recently adopted the team name **Alto Livello Kabaliwan (ALK)**.

May 23 saw Giulia and Mayu Iwatani go to a 15:00 time-limit draw, in what will be the only singles confrontation between the two teams before the duos meet once again on June 6 in a non-title match. On June 12, at Tokyo Dream Cinderella 2021 Special Edition, World of Stardom champion (and **Queen’s Quest** member) **Utami Hayashishita** makes her V5 defense against Syuri. The event will also feature the finals of the Cinderella Tournament.

On that note, I have a special interview with Stardom Founder and CEO, Rossy Ogawa, which begins on page 72 of this issue. Ogawa and I spoke about his career in wrestling and his future aspirations for Stardom. It is worth a read if you are a fan of Stardom or are interested in learning more about the largest women’s wrestling promotion currently running. □

ON THE INDIES

BY ANDREA HANGST

IN ONLY 61 days as IWTV Independent Wrestling champion, and in his third defense of the title, **Lee Moriarty** was defeated by **Wheeler YUTA** at Beyond Wrestling's Project Reality on May 6. Compared to the lengthy reign of his predecessor, **WARHORSE**, the quick turnover of the IWTV belt was surprising to onlookers. That's not quite the case for YUTA himself, who has had designs on the Independent Wrestling championship for some time.

YUTA and Moriarty's most recent rivalry dates back to Beyond Wrestling's Two Weeks Notice in July 2020, where YUTA came out on top. However, Moriarty (as **Genkai**) bested Wheeler (as **Wyldkat**) in the finals of last fall's *Masked Wrestler* series, granting Moriarty the fateful match against WARHORSE. These two slights, combined, lit a fire under YUTA.

"My primary goal has always been the IWTV championship," he told *PWI*. "Earning revenge was certainly a motivating factor, but I've always had my eyes on the championship."

That focus seemed to have also sparked a change in attitude in Wheeler YUTA, the evolution of which has been evident over the past year. But don't call it a "heel turn"—YUTA attributes it to "largely just me being my true self without any restrictions. I've always tried to be a good person, but often I do it at my own expense."

Not that he's shunning fan support. "If you're still rocking with me, great," he said. "But, if not, I'm going to go get mine and not care what you think about it."

Case in point: The reaction of the Beyond crowd after YUTA won the IWTV championship from Moriarty in 50-plus minutes. Thoroughly against the challenger from the jump, the fans in attendance were won over by his technical mastery against the supremely talented Moriarty. That was not lost on YUTA, who has a long history with Beyond Wrestling (which likely contributed to the positive response).

"I don't think they're all fully behind my new outlook, but they've seen me grow up in front of them,"

he said. "My first match for Beyond was in a bar I wasn't old enough to be in yet. They've seen me graduate college and congratulated me at shows. They watched me change physically and mentally and have seen me at almost every stage in my career. Hell, they were in line waiting for Americanrana to start one year, saw a guy hit my car and speed off, then all emailed me video so I could claim it on my insurance ... I think, through all of that, we've developed a bond that all sort of exploded when I won the championship."

YUTA does not take the responsibility of being champion lightly, citing the prestige brought to the IWTV belt by former titleholders. "My goal is



PHOTO BY JON WASHER

Wheeler YUTA connects with a German suplex on rival Lee Moriarty, whom he defeated for the Independent Wrestling championship in an epic battle.

MV Young prepares for a hard-hitting battle with Jody The Wrestler (now Jody Himself) at the third edition of his PolyAm Cult Party.



PHOTO BY SOFIE VASQUEZ

to build upon that and make my reign truly special,” said YUTA. “Not only were the past champions incredible wrestlers, but they also are my friends and mentors. I want to do them justice and make them proud.”

But is YUTA willing to claim the title of “Best Indie Wrestler In North America,” as many have called Moriarty? “I’m not sure if I’d say I’m the best,” said YUTA. “But, then again, I don’t have to. I have a championship that says it for me.”



Five hours of pro wrestling in a backyard in Western PA, in the rain? That’s just another Saturday for **MV Young**. On April 24, Young, along with Uncanny Attractions: Drags and Dropkicks, presented

the third iteration of MV Young’s PolyAm Cult Party. Heavy on drag performances, punk rock, and a bold, DIY aesthetic, it was equally focused on presenting a variety platter of the very best in independent wrestling.

“I don’t book anything twice,” Young told *PWI*. “That’s a problem in wrestling ... you book all these really talented people, but then, the cadence and rhythm of every match is the same. Especially on, like, the ‘super indie’-style shows where we’re just booking like, ‘work rate, work rate, work rate.’ I think that the third [event] was my best booking job to date because ev-

ery match offers something completely different.”

PolyAm Cult Party 3 featured 13 bouts out of a planned 16—the weather was a factor—and certainly had something for every type of wrestling fan. That included an 11-person scramble, won by **Aspyn The Mermaid**, **Charles Mason** defeating Lee Moriarty, **Allie Katch (Kat)** besting **Molly McCoy**, Young defeating **Jody The Wrestler**, and a main event that saw **Ziggy Haim** defeat **David Lawless** for the Ryse Grand title.

“I don’t book for wrestling fans,” Young admitted. I don’t give a **** about drawing people in with the moves or the ‘potential’ of this match. How [about if] someone has never seen wrestling before?

How’s every single match look to them? I think that’s something I go in with an eye for.”

Young wanted his Party to feel like an event, and not just another Saturday afternoon. “There hasn’t been a non-GCW, big indie show during the pandemic,” he said. “I was like, *I’m okay with making this an event*. You know, it’s gonna be funny. I’m gonna make fun of how long it is, but we’ll make it work. And then, it was me thinking, *How are these individual matches going to stand out compared to everyone else?*”

The show was a success, drawing an average of 1,000 live Twitch viewers throughout and garnering many more views afterward. It also trended on Twitter.

But Young doesn’t want to be thought of as just a promoter or producer. He’s a prolific rising star in independent wrestling in his own right, and is the current Wrestler’s Lab champion. He reached the finals of the Enjoy Cup Championship tournament, falling to Lee Moriarty. And he had one of the stand-out matches of WrestleMania weekend in his loss to **JD Drake** at Effy’s Big Gay Brunch. He’s also faced the likes of **Devon Monroe**, **Daniel Garcia**, **Willow Nightingale**, and **Big Callux** this year.

“My goal is to just keep making people realize that I’m delivering every time I’m given the opportunity,” said Young. “The JD Drake matchup is my preferred style, and that’s my bread and butter. But I can wrestle the technical wrestlers, I can wrestle comedy, hardcore ... I can go wrestle a WWE or WCW veteran this weekend, and I can go wrestle a deathmatch next weekend. I want [people] to be like, ‘Yeah, great character ... he draws people in, but he can go. He can deliver with any type of wrestler.’” □

A QUICK WORD WITH...

ROSSY OGAWA

The Influential Joshi Promoter Discusses Stardom, All Japan Women, And More

TEXT BY WALTER YEATES

WORLD WONDER RING Stardom was officially founded by longtime wrestling backstage hand Rossy Ogawa, former two-time WWWA champion Nanae Takahashi, and Fuka Kakimoto on September 7, 2010. The first Stardom show was held on January 23, 2011, in Tokyo, Japan, at the Shin-Kiba 1st Ring arena.

The current face of Stardom, Mayu Iwatani, was featured in a match against Arisa Hoshiki during the event, beginning a bright future in the company for both. Unfortunately, Hoshiki's career would be cut short due to neck injuries, while Iwatani continues to build her reputation as a great performer within the wrestling industry.

Also appearing on that first show was Yoshiko, a promising young wrestler who fell to Yoko Bito in the main event. Four years later, during the headline match of Stardom Queen's Shout, Yoshiko behaved highly unprofessionally in a match against Act Yasukawa, which saw Yasukawa severely injured (she'd soon retire early from an in-ring wrestling career). After an initial exile, Yoshiko would gain forgiveness from Stardom earlier this year, facing Iwatani in a highly-rated bout at the company's 10th anniversary show.

Back in October 2019, Bushiroad, the owners of New Japan Pro-Wrestling, held a press conference announcing the purchase of Stardom, with officials from Bushiroad being added to the business side of the operation beginning on December 1, 2019. However, much like NJPW, the Stardom office remained intact, with Rossy Ogawa remaining CEO and

DECADES LATER, AJW REMAINS THE GOLD STANDARD FOR JAPANESE WOMEN'S PRO WRESTLING (OR JOSHI).



The legendary Manami Toyota dropkicks Dynamite Kansai.

Former Crush Gal Lioness Asuka attempts a submission on Mima Shimoda.



PHOTOS BY KOICHI YOSHIZAWA

Aja Kong dives onto Kyoko Inoue.

family, with many of her friends within the promotion taking to Twitter to share their grief with the wrestling community.

However, with a growing and talented roster, Stardom is poised to make a run that could, realistically, see them come close to capturing the

glory once held by All Japan Women's Pro-Wrestling (AJW). In the following conversation, Stardom co-founder Rossy Ogawa touches on his time with AJW and what he sees in the future for World Wonder Ring Stardom.

YEATES: For those who do not know, you began your career in wrestling working for the most successful

Executive Producer of the wrestling side of the operation, despite Stardom's integration into the newly formed Bushiroad Fight sub-entity.

Before the onset of COVID-19, Stardom gained momentum due to the marketing prowess of Bushiroad, in combination with the in-ring performances of the Stardom roster. Last year's untimely death of Hana Kimura also rocked the Stardom



Mayu Iwatani prepares for her match in Osaka, Japan, last December.

PHOTO BY YUICHI KOJIMA

women's wrestling promotion of all time, All Japan Women's Pro-Wrestling. Could you speak about your time there, including the jobs you held?

OGAWA: I worked for All Japan Women for about 20 years. After graduating from photography school, I started working for AJW at the age of 20, and was there until I was 40. At first, as a public relations officer, my job was mainly focused on the tag team Beauty Pair, who were becoming really popular, and I was involved in the production of posters and printed matter for entertainment appearances that they made, such as TV programs. Every day, hundreds of fans rushed to the office parking lot to meet them. Their popularity was covered in the news by NHK, a national broadcaster. After Beauty Pair disbanded and retired, AJW's popularity was sluggish, but then the Crush Gals team was born, and they became even more popular wrestlers than Beauty Pair. Like Beauty Pair, they made their debut as singers, and released albums, so a lot of my time was spent coordinating with TV and magazines, and I managed the entertainment activities of Crush Gals (as I had with Beauty Pair). Crush Gals were together for five years, and I spent most of that time with them. In the 1990s, I was in charge of matchmaking (booking) for major competitions and big shows, and raised the level of this era

Ogawa says he would like to see NXT U.K.'s Piper Niven (seen splashing Amale) return to Stardom at some point.



of women's professional wrestling by involving other promotions in our shows. We held shows in Nippon Budokan, Yokohama Arena, Ryogoku Kokugikan, and the Tokyo Dome. I became the director of the planning and public relations department, and a producer in the software department.

YEATES: What do you feel AJW's legacy is in professional wrestling?

OGAWA: It's been 16 years since AJW disbanded, but no group has yet emerged to overtake their spot. All the wrestlers and staff who were a part of AJW are proud, and many are still doing various jobs in the industry.

YEATES: How did your time in AJW and Hyper Visual Fighting ArSION (ARSION) prepare you for World Wonder Ring Stardom?

OGAWA: I experienced two different promotions and fully understood the characteristics of female professional wrestlers. In addition, I learned office management and talent training and guidance.

YEATES: With the success Bushiroad had marketing NJPW, how do you feel they have helped Stardom grow?

OGAWA: It's a fact that Stardom's presence has grown from a wide range of marketing and public relations activities and being under the control of a listed company. In the future, we will aim for further heights.

YEATES: Do you have future aspirations to have Stardom dojos across the world, while running events in other parts of Asia, Europe, and North America?

OGAWA: It goes without saying that we should take the world into consideration, but I think that it is essential to have excellent business partners. In order to start a dojo, you have to raise your profile in each country.

YEATES: With the wrestling revival in Australia, is that a potential market where Stardom could recruit wrestlers and run events?

OGAWA: It is always a welcome challenge to develop talent not only from Australia, but from all over the world. The first step is having them on shows and [introducing] them to the audience.

YEATES: If you wish to comment, were you pleased with how Yoshiko's recent involvement went with Stardom?

STARDOM OFFERS HIGH-QUALITY MATCH-UPS AND RIVALRIES THAT SIGNAL IT MAY BE THE HEIR-APPARENT TO AJW.



Rossy Ogawa displays the World of Stardom championship belt (the "Red Belt") before Utami Hayashishita's defense against Momo Watanabe.

PHOTOS BY YUICHI KOJIMA



Starlight Kid executes an exciting aerial attack during a six-woman tag bout.

OGAWA: Yoshiko was a founding member of Stardom and was an early core player. There were various things that happened, but she wiped them all away when she came back into our ring.

YEATES: Who are some wrestlers you would like to see compete in a Stardom ring?

OGAWA: Toni Storm and Viper (Piper Niven), who belong to NXT, were brought over before by Stardom, and they'd like to come back to Japan. I also hope that Io Shirai and Kairi Sane will appear. We also welcome wrestlers from other Japanese promotions who want to challenge Stardom. ■

Allie Kat Is Dead... Long Live Allie Katch!

One of the indie circuit's most beloved characters, Allie Kat, has transformed into the brooding and deliberate Allie Katch. In this PWI exclusive, she reveals the reason for her new attitude.



TEXT BY CAM HAWKINS

EVERYONE CAN'T BE special. It's one of those cruel truths that we pretend doesn't exist. Because, by definition, if everyone's special, no one is. We tell people they're unique to boost their confidence, to contribute to their success, and really just to be nice. And yet, we know special when we see it. It triggers our interest, support, and emotions. What happens when someone's uniqueness causes pushback? What if someone decides to dial back what made them stand out to push toward a greater goal? Allie Katch happens.

"Things were always trending this way," says the former Allie Kat, fresh off a decisive win over AAW Pro's Heather Reckless. "People need to know what I'm working for, and what I deserve."

Despite being wildly popular on the independent circuit, Allie Kat found herself unable to break through to the next level. And, after proving herself in the ring over and over, she grew tired of not being taken seriously.

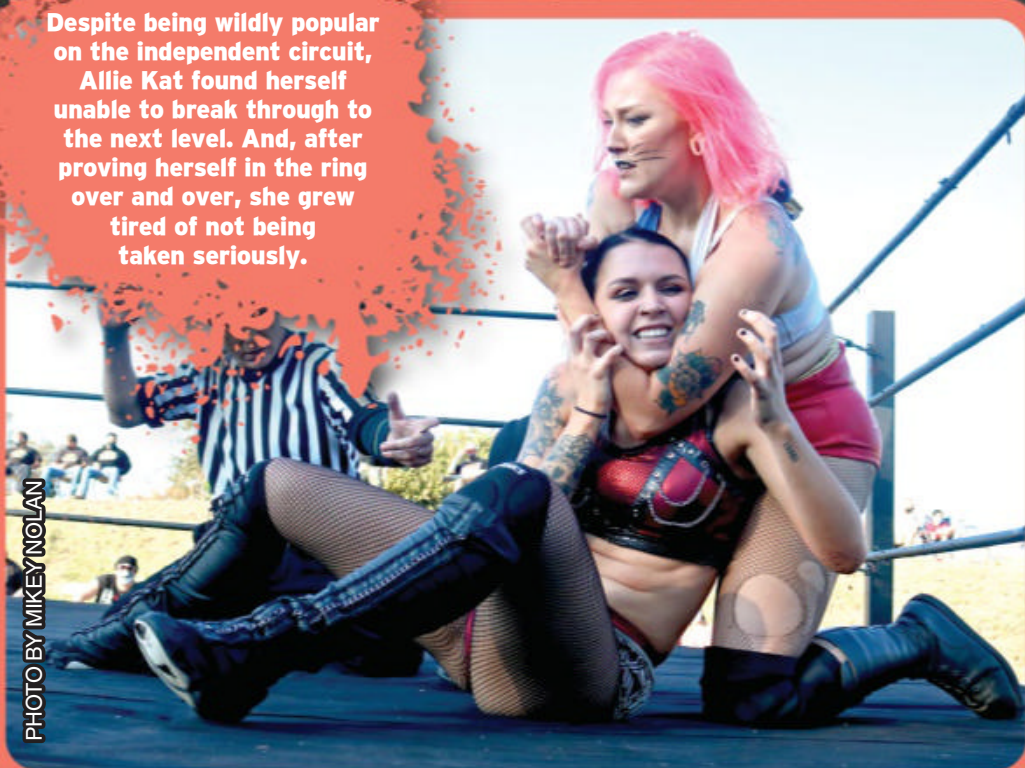


PHOTO BY MIKEY NOLAN



PHOTO BY NICK CONSALVO/AAW PRO



It was in Chicago's AAW where Katch first leaned into her darker persona, using ground-and-pound offense to overcome opponents like Seishin [left]. Of course, it's helped to have the backing of bodyguard Hartenbower and manager John E. Bravo [right].

PHOTOS BY NICK CONSALVO/AAW PRO



Validation wasn't always Allie Katch's primary focus, but it's very much at the forefront of her new attitude. The "look at me" factor of her earlier persona has evolved into more of an "I know you see me" quality that, quite frankly, has more eyes on her than ever.

The newly minted "Catch-As-Can" grappler's path to wrestling notoriety is unique. Originally finding inspiration in WWE's Team Extreme, the self-admitted "alt kid" was more into Pantera than P.E. Since she never played any organized sports growing up, the personalities of the acts she'd see on Monday nights resonated way more with young Allie than the holds and reversals. "They listened to the music I did, they had personalities like mine, I thought they were as cool as you could get!"

Allie Katch lost track of wrestling during her formative years, but picked it back up through a friend late in high school. They'd watch the same Attitude Era programming she lived for in kindergarten. Through teenage eyes, she started to notice the grace and precision of the acts she held so dear. The personalities and movesets were blending, and that fluidity began to give way to a new long-term goal—one solidified by the early days of NXT. "I was really into Bayley, Sasha Banks, and Sami Zayn," Katch said. "They had these huge, enjoyable personalities but could also go out there and have great matches."

While not initially her first choice in careers, a little bad luck wound up steering her toward professional wrestling.

"College wasn't going the way I planned," she admitted. "So, I look at my tax return and say, 'I can either pay my way back in, or I can attend a fan camp.'"

With what's looking like money well spent, the aspiring grappler attended a Booker T camp in Houston, and was off and running right away. "So, now I'm wrestling, and immediately, I know how I want to be presented," she said. "The 'Kat' thing is relatable, easy to latch onto. Everyone knows what a cat is."

The gimmick, which saw her scratch and claw at opponents after entrapping them by asking for belly scratches, endeared Allie Kat to fans nationwide. "But it started to overshadow the real progress I was making," she said. "It was breaking people's brains that I could be both a magnetic character and go hold-for-hold with the best out there."

Proving to be extremely cerebral, the Texas native remembers plotting out the change. At GCW's Fight Forever, she was scheduled to face Willow Nightingale, and she knew that there would be more eyes on her than usual. "I saw Willow, and thought 'she's got it all.' People are into her personality, she's got this great look, and her wrestling's outstanding. So, I still came out, Texas gear, cowboy hat, all that. But after that handshake? All business. Every move was meant to hurt, every hold was meant to finish that match. No wasted motion, no wasted breath."

Over the next few months, the changes began to stick. The Great State's red, white, and blue flag colors were ditched for black (notably, in Chicago's AAW, where the former fan favorite has displayed a harsh new attitude). Her hair was tied back more often. There was less preening and posturing. Instead of "feeling out" someone at the beginning of matches, she'd take respected wrestlers like Jordan Blade directly to the ground to test their mettle. The whimsical Allie Kat was replaced by the precise, no-nonsense Allie Katch.

As commentators struggle to comprehend the endgame in all this, publications like this one play a



The Texas native brings the hurt to Billie Starkz, a talented young wrestler who experienced her new mean streak firsthand. The painted-on whiskers and flag attire are cosmetic reminders of the persona Katch left behind.

PHOTO BY CHRIS GRASSO



PHOTO BY MIKEY NOLAN

Katch connects with a senton splash on Elayna Black (NXT's Cora Jade). A decade into her career, she continues to add new moves to her offensive arsenal, while training with fellow grapplers like Lee Moriarty and MV Young before shows.

significant role. Allie Kat wanted to sell t-shirts, admire cool fan art, and meet

the wrestlers she grew up idolizing. Allie Katch is in this for validation.

"I don't just want to see my name in *PWI*, or anywhere else, saying 'Allie defeats (whoever).' I want that ranking, I want those plaques, I want those belts. I want you to have to respect the time I'm putting in, how good I've become," she said. "The money's gonna be there, I'm too good for it *not* to be there. But I look around at guys like WARHORSE and Danhausen, guys with these huge personalities, but they've got the hardware, too. So, me not having that? Doesn't sit right with me. I need those things you can point to, those things you can hold. I need to be *the guy* somewhere. I'm working too hard not to be."

Allie Katch's increased in-ring acumen isn't made up on the fly. She's been picking the brains of some of the very best in the game. "I'll drive two hours, on a whim, to go train with [former Independent Wrestling champion] Lee Moriarty. I'll make the trip to New York to train with MV Young, I'll go

Reminiscent of the great Sara Del Rey, Katch uses a painful bridging Boston crab to score the submission victory over Billie Starkz during their WrestleMania weekend match.



PHOTO BY CHRIS GRASSO

point, she pauses—not to look for a name, but to put a bit of distance between who she wants to beat, and, eventually, who she *needs* to beat.

"Deonna Purrazzo," she said. "Deonna Purrazzo's supposed to be the best out there. And she very well might be. But I need to see it. I need to know."

With a new name, new goals, and new ideals, Allie Katch seems to be well on her way to being a success twice-over in wrestling. What was unique and endearing about her isn't gone, but tucked away to make room for the war chest she's decided to build.

In some of the best works of fiction, dragons would hoard gold, riches, and trinkets, not because they needed them, but because the dragon dared you to take what they had gained. "I'm getting better every day, and the end game? The end game is me in the magazines, the websites, the highlight videos, having it all," she said. "Winning it all. Being it all." She may not be a dragon, but Allie Katch? Absolutely on fire. ■



PHOTO BY CHRIS GRASSO

While not wishing to leave behind everything that has brought her to the dance, Allie Katch is now determined to earn the validation she's long been denied—championships, awards, and, yes, more ink in *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*.

THE WAY IT WAS

BY BRIAN R. SOLOMON

AS HESITANT AS I am to inflate the ego of Kenny Omega any more than it already is, as *Pro Wrestling Illustrated's* resident historian, I simply couldn't let his historic accomplishment last April go by without recognition. At Rebellion, Omega defeated Rich Swann to become the Impact/TNA World heavyweight champion. Of course, there were a few things historic about this match—not the least of which was the fact that Omega was not a contracted Impact wrestler, but under contract with All Elite Wrestling. But, for my purposes, even more important was the fact Omega was already the AEW World heavyweight champion at the time, as well as the AAA Mega champion (the company's world heavyweight title). The main event of Rebellion was, effectively, a world title unification match. This kind of match has happened before. The difference this time was that there was an actual, clear-cut winner, and the winner truly took all. No cop-out DQs, countouts, or time-limit draws.

By accomplishing this feat, Kenny Omega was now in possession of three different world heavyweight titles—the top prizes from three different major wrestling companies. This is an incredible and almost unthinkable feat that hasn't been accomplished in North America for 70 years, and the man to do it back then was none other than Lou Thesz.

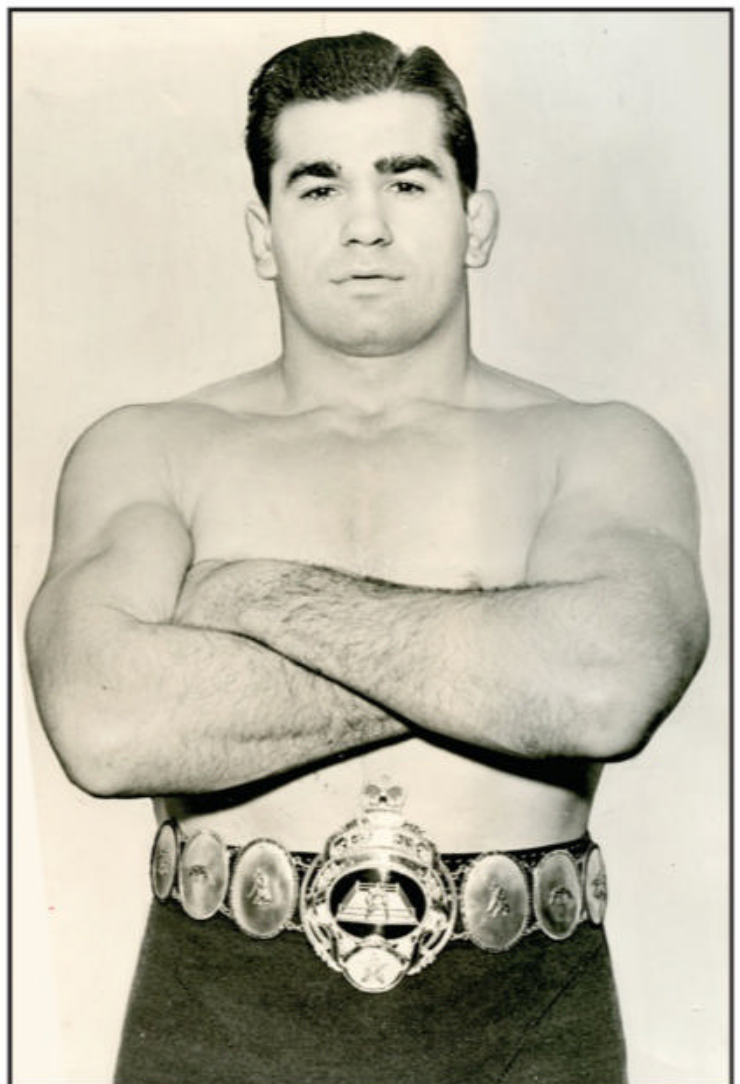
I say North America, because, as was pointed out to me by the vigilant masses on Twitter, Big Van Vader did something similar in the 1990s by simultaneously holding Mexico's UWA title, Germany's CWA title, and Japan's IWGP title. But let's stick with North America—the historic epicenter and birthplace of the pro wrestling business—and look back at the amazing unifications pulled off by the Hungarian shoemaker's son during the era of Harry Truman, poodle skirts, and *I Love Lucy*.

Typical of Thesz, often cited as the greatest to ever lace up the boots, is the fact that he unified not three, but *four* different major world heavyweight titles between 1948 and 1952. It started in Indianapolis on July 20, 1948, when Thesz beat "Wild" Bill Longson, inventor of the piledriver, to win the world heavyweight title as recognized by what was then the most important governing body in wrestling, the National Wrestling Association. Not to be confused with the National Wrestling Alliance, this original NWA was a branch of the National Boxing Association,

known today as the World Boxing Association (WBA).

Speaking of the better-known National Wrestling Alliance, July 1948 also happened to be the same month that it was originally formed in a meeting of promoters at the beautiful Hotel President in Waterloo, Iowa, recognizing veteran Orville Brown as its first world heavyweight champion.

From the beginning, one of the major goals of the Alliance was



The standard-bearer of the National Wrestling Alliance in its salad days, the great Lou Thesz was something of a "belt collector"—nearly three-quarters of a century before Kenny Omega ever attempted such a thing.



Thesz grapples with the legendary Sailor Art Thomas in Houston, May 1963. Then in his third reign as NWA World heavyweight champion, Thesz had already unified top championships from the West Coast, Midwest, and Northeastern U.S.

the creation of a single, undisputed world heavyweight champ to reign over the entire business, clearing up the title confusion that has always been notorious in wrestling. To that end, promoters pushed for a unification match between Brown and Thesz, which would not only help establish an undisputed champion, but also settle the chaos arising from the existence of two different groups that were both called “NWA.”

The Brown/Thesz match was signed to take place on November 25, 1949, but a crippling car accident on the first of the month cut short the career of Orville Brown. The National Wrestling Alliance made the determination to award Brown’s title to Thesz. From that day forward, it was the National Wrestling Alliance that became the dominant “NWA” in wrestling.

The ideal standard-bearer for the NWA, Thesz was just the kind of person the group had envisioned as the undisputed world heavyweight champion they’d hoped to establish. It was during his amazing eight-year reign that they set about making that dream a reality.

Thesz took his role very seriously, and set his sights on the other major world heavyweight titles floating around at the time. Perhaps the most important of these was the one recognized by the original American Wrestling Association, based in Boston and run by a group of promoters headed by Paul Bowser. The Boston impresario wasn’t interested in unifying his title with the NWA’s, but found himself the victim of a screwjob when his champion, Native American star Don Eagle, was double-crossed in the ring on May 26, 1950, in Chicago—a town controlled by NWA promoter Fred Kohler.

The perpetrator of that double-cross, who now had a claim to the AWA World championship, was the one and only “Toast Of The Coast” himself, Gorgeous George. The reason for the underhanded tactic was simple: George was scheduled to face Lou Thesz in a blockbuster main event at Chicago’s Wrigley Field on July 27. So, when Thesz convincingly bested “The Gorgeous One” in two straight falls on that date, it meant he could now add a third credible world title claim to his growing trophy case.

But probably the most well-known of all Thesz’ world title unifications took place a couple years later, at Gilmore Field in Los Angeles. Still the NWA World heavyweight champion at the time, Thesz came out West to contend with the flamboyant Baron Michele Leone, recognized as world heavyweight champion by a West Coast contingent headed by promoters Cal Eaton and Johnny Doyle.

Although regional in nature, the California wrestling office was located in one of America’s media centers, right in the heart of Hollywood, making Leone’s claim an important one. And so, it was on May 21, 1952, that Thesz defeated Leone before a record California crowd that famously drew pro wrestling’s first \$100,000 gate. He had collected his fourth world heavyweight title.

With all other major titles eliminated and absorbed into his NWA title, Lou Thesz now stood atop the wrestling landscape as the only widely recognized world heavyweight champion in the industry—and would continue to do so until 1956. Now that’s an accomplishment that not even the AEW/AAA/Impact World champion and master of the V-trigger can claim. Sorry, Kenny. □

PWI OFFICIAL RATINGS

FOR PERIOD ENDED
MAY 31, 2021

HEAVYWEIGHT

- 1 KENNY OMEGA**
203, Winnipeg, MB
(1) AEW/IMPACT/AAA champion
- 2 BOBBY LASHLEY**
273, Colorado Springs, CO
(2) WWE champion
- 3 ROMAN REIGNS**
265, Pensacola, FL
(3) WWE Universal champion
- 4 KEIJI MUTO**
243, Yamanashi, Japan
(4) GHC heavyweight champion
- 5 KARRION KROSS**
265, New York, NY
(5) NXT heavyweight champion
- 6 SHEAMUS**
267, Dublin, Ireland
(-) WWE I-C champion
- 7 MIRO**
304, Plovdiv, Bulgaria
(-) AEW TNT champion
- 8 JOSH ALEXANDER**
240, Bolton, ON
(-) X division champion
- 9 APOLLO CREWS**
240, Sacramento, CA
(-) WWE U.S. champion
- 10 WHEELER YUTA**
190, Philadelphia, PA
(-) IWTW champion

WOMEN

- 1 RHEA RIPLEY**
137, Adelaide, Australia
(2) Raw Women's champion
- 2 BRITT BAKER**
135, Pittsburgh, PA
(9) AEW Women's champion
- 3 BIANCA BELAIR**
134, Knoxville, TN
(1) Smackdown Women's champion
- 4 RAQUEL GONZALEZ**
176, Rio Grande Valley, TX
(3) NXT Women's champion
- 5 SERENA DEEB**
130, Fairfax, VA
(-) NWA Women's champion
- 6 SYURI**
128, Kanagawa, Japan
(4) Stardom SWA champion
- 7 DEONNA PURRAZZO**
112, Livingston, NJ
(5) Knockouts champion
- 8 THUNDER ROSA**
132, Tijuana, Mexico
(-) AEW/NWA contender
- 9 JADE CARGILL**
160, Vero Beach, FL
(10) Undefeated in AEW
- 10 CHARLOTTE FLAIR**
144, Charlotte, NC
(-) Raw #1 contender

TAG TEAMS

- 1 MATT & NICK JACKSON**
Combined weight: 350 pounds
(1) AEW tag team champions
- 2 DAVID FINLAY & JUICE ROBINSON**
Combined weight: 429 pounds
(2) Impact tag team champions
- 3 DOMINIK & REY MYSTERIO**
Combined weight: 375 pounds
(-) Smackdown tag team champions
- 4 TAMA TONGA & TANGA LOA**
Combined weight: 430 pounds
(3) IWGP tag team champions
- 5 CARISTICO & MISTICO**
Combined weight: 333 pounds
(-) CMLL tag team champions
- 6 NATALYA & TAMINA**
Combined weight: 285 pounds
(-) WWE Women's tag team champions
- 7 GIULIA & SYURI**
Combined weight: 234 pounds
(10) Goddess of Stardom champions
- 8 NASH CARTER & WES LEE**
Combined weight: 366 pounds
(6) NXT tag team champions
- 9 JON MOXLEY & EDDIE KINGSTON**
Combined Weight: 469 pounds
(-) Challenged for AEW tag title
- 10 KIERA HOGAN & TASHA STEELZ**
Combined weight: UNK
(-) Impact Knockouts tag champions

WWE RAW

Champion:
BOBBY LASHLEY
(C) 273, Colorado Springs, CO

- 1—SHEAMUS**
(1) 267, Dublin, Ireland
- 2—DREW MCINTYRE**
(2) 265, Ayr, Scotland
- 3—DAMIAN PRIEST**
(5) 249, New York, NY
- 4—BRAUN STROWMAN**
(3) 385, Sherrills Ford, NC
- 5—RIDDLE**
(4) 216, Las Vegas, NV
- 6—RANDY ORTON**
(7) 250, St. Louis, MO
- 7—KOFI KINGSTON**
(4) 212, Ghana, West Africa
- 10—ANGEL GARZA**
(-) 205, Monterrey, Mexico
- 10—CEDRIC ALEXANDER**
(-) 205, Charlotte, NC
- 10—XAVIER WOODS**
(6) 205, Atlanta, GA

SMACKDOWN

Champion:
ROMAN REIGNS
(C) 265, Pensacola, FL

- 1—APOLLO CREWS**
(1) 240, Sacramento, CA
- 2—CESARO**
(2) 232, Lucerne, CH
- 3—KEVIN OWENS**
(5) 266, Marieville, QC
- 4—BIG E**
(4) 285, Tampa, FL
- 5—SHINSUKE NAKAMURA**
(-) 229, Kyoto, Japan
- 6—BARON CORBIN**
(7) 275, Kansas City, MO
- 7—REY MYSTERIO**
(8) 175, San Diego, CA
- 8—DOMINIK MYSTERIO**
(-) 200, San Diego, CA
- 9—SAMI ZAYN**
(10) 212, Montreal, QC
- 10—SETH ROLLINS**
(9) 217, Davenport, IA

AEW

Champion:
KENNY OMEGA
(C) 203, Winnipeg, MB

- 1—MIRO**
(-) 304, Plovdiv, Bulgaria
- 2—DARBY ALLIN**
(1) 180, Seattle, WA
- 3—ADAM PAGE**
(2) 228, Aaron's Creek, VA
- 4—CODY RHODES**
(6) 220, Atlanta, GA
- 5—JUNGLE BOY**
(-) 150, Los Angeles, CA
- 6—CHRISTIAN CAGE**
(3) 212, Toronto, ON
- 7—MJF**
(8) 216, Plainview, NY
- 8—JON MOXLEY**
(5) 224, Cincinnati, OH
- 9—STING**
(10) 250, Venice Beach, CA
- 10—CHRIS JERICHO**
(9) 227, Winnipeg, MB

IMPACT

Champion:
KENNY OMEGA
(C) 203, Winnipeg, MB

- 1—JOSH ALEXANDER**
(1) 240, Bolton, ON
- 2—TREY MIGUEL**
(6) 232, Nashville, TN
- 3—MOOSE**
(-) 295, Atlanta, GA
- 4—SAMI CALLIHAN**
(4) 216, Dayton, OH
- 5—RICH SWANN**
(2) 200, Baltimore, MD
- 6—BRIAN MYERS**
(5) 223, Glen Cove, NY
- 7—CHRIS BEY**
(-) 180, Alexandria, VA
- 8—MATT CARDONA**
(10) 224, Long Island, NY
- 9—ACE AUSTIN**
(3) 190, Atlantic City, NJ
- 10—EDDIE EDWARDS**
(-) 214, Boston, MA

ROH

Champion:
RUSH
(C) 240, Jalisco, Mexico

- 1—JONATHAN GRESHAM**
(2) 175, Atlanta, GA
- 2—TONY DEPPEN**
(-) 165, Shamokin, PA
- 3—TRACY WILLIAMS**
(1) 190, Brooklyn, NY
- 4—SHANE TAYLOR**
(4) 315, Cleveland, OH
- 5—JOSH WOODS**
(7) 220, West Palm Beach
- 6—WORLD FAMOUS CB**
(-) 135, Trenton, NJ
- 7—LSG**
(-) 202, Edison, NJ
- 8—JOE KEYS**
(-) 203, Largo, FL
- 9—SILAS YOUNG**
(-) 220, Milwaukee, WI
- 10—PCO**
(-) 300, Montreal, QC

Ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or tag team. Unless submitted by promoters, ratings are compiled by a committee consisting of Kevin McElvaney, Pat Laprade, Kris Zellner, Louie Dee, Harry Burkett, Jason McVeigh, Marek Indyka (Australian ratings), and STRIGGA (cagematch.net, purolove.com). The numbers in parenthesis indicate a wrestler's position in that category last issue. **Note: Ratings for NJPW have been withheld this month due to the lack of an IWGP World champion.**



DOMINIK & REY MYSTERIO

ALL JAPAN PRO WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Suwama; 1—Jake Lee; 2—Shuji Ishikawa; 3—CIMA; 4—Kento Miyahara; 5—Yuma Aoyagi; 6—Koji Iwamoto; 7—Zeus; 8—Izanagi; 9—Hokuto Omori; 10—Shotaro Ashino

AUSTRALIA (OVERALL): 1—Adam Brooks; 2—Carter Dreams; 3—Matt Hayter; 4—Rat Daddy; 5—Locky Hendricks; 6—Mat Diamond; 7—Ricky South; 8—Robbie Eagles; 9—Redshaw; 10—Mick Moretti

DRAMATIC DREAM TEAM: CHAMPION—Jun Akiyama; 1—HARASHIMA; 2—Yuki Ueno; 3—Konosuke Takeshita; 4—Chris Brookes; 5—Makoto Oishi; 6—Soma Takao; 7—Shunma Katsumata; 8—Yuji Hino; 9—Kazusada Higuchi; 10—Akito

GAME CHANGER WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Nick Gage; 1—Alex Colon; 2—Lee Moriarty; 3—Jordan Oliver; 4—AJ Gray; 5—Mance Warner; 6—Rickey Shane Page; 7—1 Called Manders; 8—Atticus Cogar; 9—Joey Janela; 10—Ken Broadway

NXT U.K.: CHAMPION—WALTER; 1—Tyler Bate; 2—Ilja Dragunov; 3—Rampage Brown; 4—A-Kid; 5—Teoman; 6—Kenny Williams; 7—Trent Seven; 8—Nathan Frazer; 9—Noam Dar; 10—Sha Samuels

OHIO VALLEY WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Cash Flo; 1—Jessie Godderz; 2—Amon; 3—Omar Amir; 4—Mahabali Shera; 5—Tony Gunn; 6—Shannon The Dude; 7—Dustin Jackson; 8—Tony Bizo; 9—AJ Daniels; 10—Luscious Lawrence

PROGRESS WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Cara Noir; 1—Kid Lykos II; 2—Spike Trivet; 3—Kid Lykos; 4—Chris Ridgeway; 5—Luke Jacobs; 6—Warren Banks; 7—Ethan Allen; 8—Danny Black; 9—ELIJAH; 10—Gene Munny

TOKYO JOSHI PRO-WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Miyu Yamashita; 1—Hikari Noa; 2—Yuka Sakazaki; 3—Maki Itoh; 4—Mizuki; 5—Yuki Kamifuku; 6—Hyper Misao; 7—Pom Harajuku; 8—Rika Tatsumi; 9—Marika Kobashi; 10—Mei Suruga

WESTSIDE XTREME WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Marius Al-Ani; 1—Levaniei; 2—Prince Ahura; 3—Robert Dreissker; 4—Tristan Archer; 5—Anil Marik; 6—Norman Harras; 7—Senza Volto; 8—Fast Time Moodo; 9—Hektor Invictus; 10—Icarus

WORLD WONDER RING STARDOM: CHAMPION—Utami Hayashishita; 1—Syuri; 2—Natsupoi; 3—Giulia; 4—Tam Nakano; 5—Saya Kamitani; 6—Unagi Sayaka; 7—Momo Watanabe; 8—Mayu Iwatani; 9—Mina Shirakawa; 10—Konami

NXT

Champion:
KARRION KROSS
(C) 265, New York, NY

1—BRONSON REED
(3) 330, Adelaide, Aus

2—PETE DUNNE
(8) 221, Birmingham, U.K.

3—JOHNNY GARGANO
(1) 199, Cleveland, OH

4—KYLE O'REILLY
(7) 200, Vancouver, BC

5—FINN BALOR
(2) 190, Bray, Ireland

6—KUSHIDA
(6) 187, Tokyo, Japan

7—LA KNIGHT
(-) 234, Hagerstown, MD

8—KILLIAN DAIN
(-) 322, Belfast, U.K.

9—DEXTER LUMIS
(9) 238, Jacksonville, FL

10—ADAM COLE
(10) 210, Panama City, FL

CMLL

Champion:
ULTIMO GUERRERO
(-) 205, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

1—LAREDO KID
(-) 180, Nuevo Laredo, Mexico

2—BLACK TAURUS
(-) 198, Torreon, Mexico

3—ULTIMO GUERRERO
(-) 205, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

4—EL CAVERNARIO
(-) 196, Zapopan, Mexico

5—STUKA JR.
(-) 185, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

6—EL CARISTICO
(-) 180, Mexico City

7—VOLADOR JR.
(-) 192, Monclova, Mexico

8—TITAN
(-) 187, Guadalajara, Mexico

9—SOBERANO JR.
(-) 165, Torreon, Mexico

10—MISTICO
(-) 167, Tala, Mexico

NOAH

Champion:
KEIJI MUTO
(C) 242, Yamanashi, Japan

1—NAOMICHI MARUFUJI
(-) 198, Saitama, Japan

2—TAKASHI SUGIURA
(4) 196, Aichi, Japan

3—ATSUSHI KOTOGE
(3) 201, Osaka, Japan

4—KATSUHIKO NAKAJIMA
(5) 209, Fukuoka, Japan

5—DAISUKE HARADA
(-) 176, Osaka, Japan

6—YUYA SUSUMU
(-) 168, Okayama, Japan

7—MASATO TANAKA
(-) 209, Tokyo, Japan

8—MASA KITAMIYA
(1) 227, Toyama, Japan

9—KAZUSHI SAKURABA
(-) 167, Akita, Japan

10—HAYATA
(6) 165, Hiroshima, Japan

MLW

Champion:
JACOB FATU
(C) 300, Samoa

1—ALEX HAMMERSTONE
(1) 251, Phoenix, AZ

2—TOM LAWLOR
(2) 205, Las Vegas, NV

3—MADS KRUGGER
(4) UNK, UNK

4—RICHARD HOLLIDAY
(5) 237, Westport, CT

5—MYRON REED
(7) 173, Louisville, KY

6—MIL MUERTES
(6) 255, UNK, UNK

7—CALVIN TANKMAN
(8) 355, Indianapolis, IN

8—ROSS VON ERICH
(9) 220, Kauai, HI

9—LIO RUSH
(3) 160, Los Angeles

10—ROCKY ROMERO
(10) 180, Havana, Cuba

INDEPENDENT

Champion:
WHEELER YUTA
(1) 190, Philadelphia, PA

1—DANIEL GARCIA
(2) 187, Buffalo, NY

2—LEE MORIARTY
(C) 185, Pittsburgh, PA

3—JOHN WAYNE MURDOCH
(3) 220, Waxahachie, TX

4—TRISH ADORA
(5) 175, Washington, D.C.

5—MATT MAKOWSKI
(6) 218, Philadelphia, PA

6—MYSTERIOUS Q
(8) 240, New Orleans, LA

7—ARIK ROYAL
(10) 265, Riverside, CA

8—CABANA MAN DAN
(-) 165, The Philippines

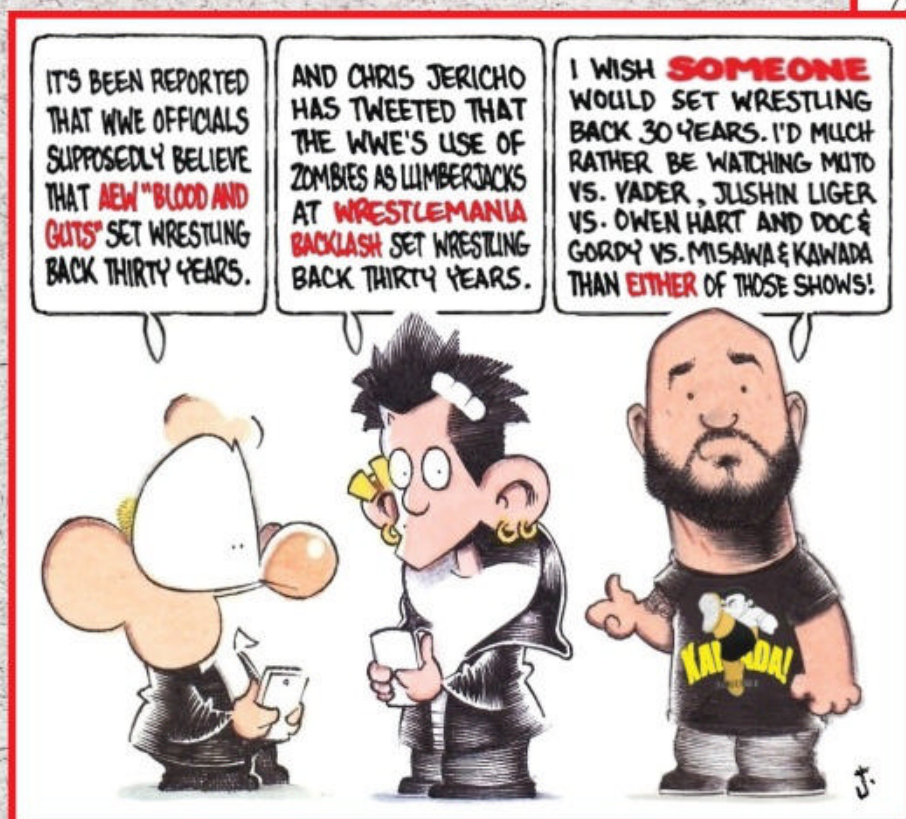
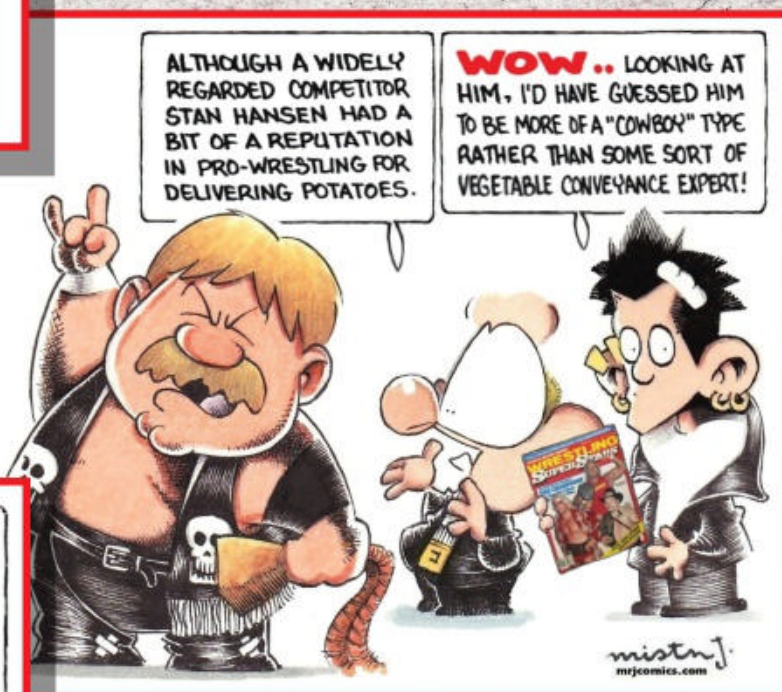
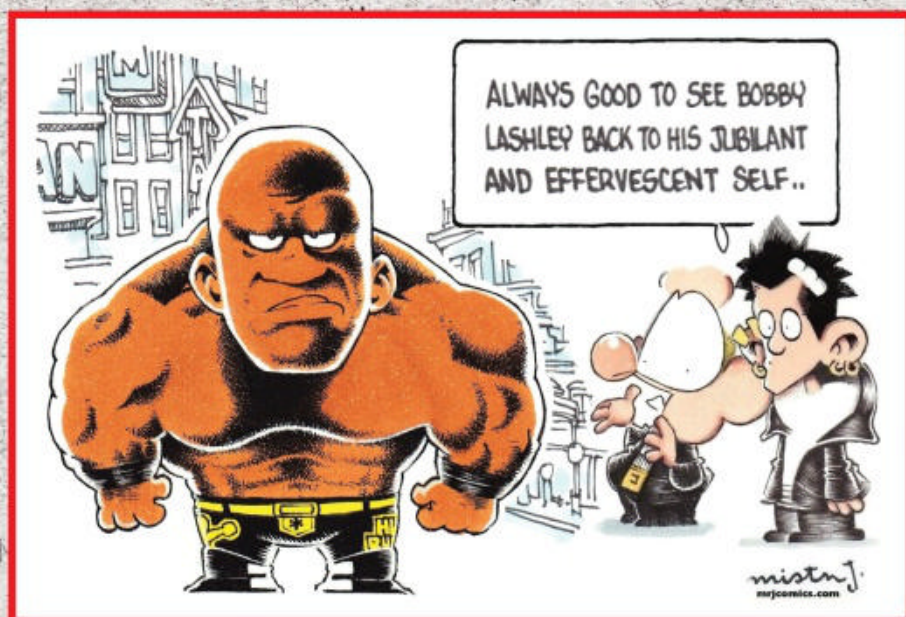
9—CHUCK PAYNE
(-) UNK, Shelton, WA

10—RITCHIE TAYLOR
(-) UNK, Melbourne, Aus



DRAWING BLOOD

BY JASON CONLAN





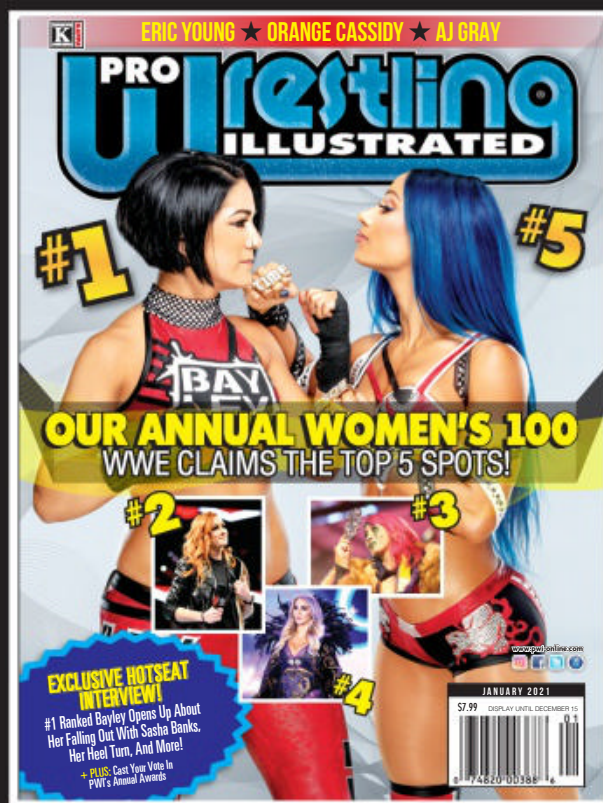
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